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Lara Brown on the dissolution of private education

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1. Over the ten years to 31 December 2025, the US dollar NAV per share compound annual growth rate ("CAGR") was 13% and the public market comparator (the FTSE All-World Total Return Index) CAGR was 11%.
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THE SPECTATOR
ESTABLISHED 1828

Boldly going nowhere

'Space: the final frontier.' Six decades since Captain James T. Kirk first uttered those words, American enthusiasm for star-trekking is stronger than ever. Artemis II's voyage presages future Nasa trips to the Moon, Mars and beyond; SpaceX's successful initial public offering and Starship rocket launches confirm continuing enthusiasm for Elon Musk's interplanetary initiatives. But, on this side of the Atlantic, our ambitions are far less stellar; rather than reach for the heavens, we fiddle with the price of bus tickets.

The potential closure of the Jodrell Bank Observatory – home to the UK's largest telescope for almost 70 years – for lack of funding is a tragedy. Its annual operational cost is £2.8 million; by contrast, Andy Burnham's £2 bus fares cap is expected to cost well over £500 million next year. With the news about Jodrell Bank coming only days after Downing Street announced the closure of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, discerning Burnham's priorities does not require a deep-space telescope. He does not want a nation that strives mightily to achieve great things but a sweet shop Britain where the state pays for our treats. This is infantilisation not innovation.

Undoubtedly, voters are worried about living costs. For two decades, household incomes have stagnated, barely creeping above pre-financial crisis levels. Food, energy and housing costs have risen rapidly, eating away at people's pay. But trying to ameliorate the deep economic woes of the nation with bribes paid for using citizens' own taxes is simply continuity Starmerism: an ever larger state intervening to ever smaller effect.

One of Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves's last acts was to announce the 'Great British Summer Savings' scheme, a series of interventions designed to help families over the holidays: a pause in fuel duty hikes, free bus travel for children, a cut to tariffs on various foods and a VAT reduction for tourist attractions. All attempts to ease the pain of inflation – the last two only possible due to Brexit – but all missing the point: we are collectively poorer as a country because we are less competitive as an economy.

These were all policies designed to generate headlines for a day or two, not to address the high taxes, excessive regulation and punitive energy costs which make the country a fiscal sinkhole. In a Labour party where MPs consider their time best used campaigning for Club Penguin's return, promoting a 'summer of sex' or misidentifying parakeets, this is perhaps the best we can expect.

Ministers now draw inspiration not from Keynes or Friedman, Churchill or Lawson, but daytime TV's Martin Lewis – the self-styled 'Money Saving Expert' whose advice on how to get cheaper car insurance is regarded as enriched intellectual uranium by politicians. There is no shame in Lewis earning a crust helping consumers save money on their utility bills. But for ministers to involve themselves so intimately in the average shopping basket demonstrates a staggering and embarrassing paucity of national ambition.

Our watchword should be enterprise – not the starship, but the private spirit of innovation

William Gladstone once suggested that a minister who does not preoccupy themselves with the 'candle-ends and cheese-parings' of public expenditure was 'not worth their salt'. But he was suggesting they had to keep a rigorous handle on wasteful spending, not preoccupy themselves with trivialities. Today, governments are keen to make small interventions while allowing the welfare bill to balloon by £50 billion in half a decade. Prime ministers once governed a quarter of the world; now they pride themselves on reducing the price of days out – more Brittas Empire than British Empire.

Rising living costs are a direct consequence of an economy which no longer adequately incentivises and rewards risk. According to the Adam Smith Institute, the number of millionaires in Britain has fallen to its lowest in two decades. Reversing that would be far more helpful than capping the price of zoo trips but this requires a government as keen on wealth creation as extraction. Unlike the Americans, we often disdain success rather than encourage it. Our watchword should be enterprise – not the starship, but the private spirit of innovation that underpins our national prosperity and pays for ministerial largesse.

When Burnham entered Downing Street, he pledged to 'bring back hope'. So far, his way of doing this has been a flurry of new policies, a social media blitz and the installation of a replica 'No. 10 door' above a Slug and Lettuce in Manchester. Being truly transformative requires something other than seeming more active and affable than Starmer. Britain's greatness has never relied solely on the comfort of her people, but on her world standing and ambitions. To content ourselves with merely being a mildly dysfunctional social democracy is selling ourselves short. Why shouldn't we aspire to explore the stars? If we have indirectly funded India's space programme through our aid, John Healey can find £2.8 million for a telescope.

For all his stylistic differences, Burnham has largely imitated his predecessors in his first few days: reiterating support for Ukraine, announcing a social care plan and tinkering with the curriculum based on his educational prejudices. He has still to reckon with those barriers to our prosperity that successive governments have failed to overcome – our sclerotic planning system, punishing energy costs and sprawling welfare system, to name but three.

Beyond policy, he must also change our national culture and give Britain her ambition back. Until he does so, he will be boldly going nowhere new.

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I have spent part of the last week thinking about imposter syndrome, and how we might be able to give it to more people.
Douglas Murray, p15

Now, when I get the feeling I'm being fed AI-generated pictures, I react like those dogs in the movies that are trained to spot Terminators.
James Delingpole, p45

I like the old Capri because there was something jaded and stubborn about it: a weary postwar British sex appeal.
Tanya Gold, p55

I know I risk sounding like an unfeeling plutocrat, given several firefighters have already lost their lives, but I cannot help thinking about the 61 crus classés of 1855.
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CONTRIBUTORS

The novelist **Lawrence Osborne**'s Diary appears on p7. His new book *Children of Wolves* is out on 6 August.

Nicky Dunne, whose Notebook appears on p20, is the chairman of Heywood Hill, which celebrates its 90th birthday this year.

Andrew Lambert details the decline of the Royal Navy on p26. His most recent book is *No More Napoleons: How Britain Managed Europe from Waterloo to World War One*.

Alex Diggins writes about 80 years of Unesco on p40. He is a freelance writer, and formerly worked on the *Telegraph*'s arts desk.

Ella Veakins, who writes about plastic plants on p47, is one of this summer's *Spectator* interns.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK

Home

Andy Burnham, the Prime Minister, summoned cabinet ministers for a day at No. 10 North – Heron House in central Manchester, shared with intelligence agencies – which he reached by private jet to Glasgow, where he had an appointment, and another private jet south to Manchester. President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine became the first international visitor to Mr Burnham, who told him: 'You can count on the UK for as long as it takes.' He decided to speed up the independent review of adult social care being undertaken by Baroness Casey of Blackstock. He said that he wanted schools to offer technical courses to children aged 14 and over. To encourage their children to start apprenticeships, some parents on benefits would be given up to £4,500 a year to make up for Universal Credit payments lost by the children starting jobs. A poll put Labour four points in front of Reform.

Kemi Badenoch, the leader of the opposition, called on the Prime Minister to bring in emergency legislation to prevent serious criminals being released early on 1 September. Angela Rayner, reappointed as Housing Secretary, said she would not repay a £16,876 ministerial severance payment that she received after resigning as deputy prime minister and housing secretary in September 2025 after failing to pay enough tax on her £800,000 flat in Hove. In the seven days up to 27 July, 881 migrants crossed the Channel in small boats, 165 on one dinghy. A water supply failure at Gatwick airport led to the closure of lavatories and restaurants and a lack of seating.

Wildfires led to the evacuation of the 700 people of Nethy Bridge in the Badenoch and Strathspey area of Inverness-shire. Fire set off a huge explosion at a store of fertiliser in an industrial unit near Rettendon in Essex; 100 firemen attended. In Northern Ireland, the cost of heating oil, used by about two-thirds of households, rose by 29 per cent in three weeks. The Jodrell Bank Observatory lost its funding from the UK Research and Innovation agency. Bill Oddie, the comedian and bad-tempered birdwatcher, died aged 85.

Abroad

The United States stopped attacking Iran after 12 nights, to give a chance to diplomatic efforts. But then Iran attacked an American base in Jordan and Saudi Arabia joined America in attacking Iran-backed militias in Iraq. A Russian missile killed 15 at an outdoor arms exhibition at a training ground near Kyiv. In a series of drone attacks on Wildberries warehouses, Ukraine hit sites in St Petersburg and Simferopol. Ukrainian drones hit an oil platform in the northern Caspian Sea, a Russian missile boat and an Iranian ship carrying components for drones and missiles from Iran to Russia. President Zelensky, in Washington for the funeral of Senator Lindsey Graham, had talks with President Donald Trump, as did Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel. The United States agreed to help Saudi Arabia develop nuclear energy, but Mr Trump said that this required Riyadh to recognise Israel. Four Palestinians and two Israeli settlers died in a clash near Tal in the occupied West Bank.

Wildfires reached within nine miles of Bordeaux and caused more than 220,000 to be evacuated. In Spain 70,000 were evacuated from an area west of Madrid and into the province of Avila. A van was driven into a crowd at an LGBT parade in Berlin, leaving one person dead and 29 wounded; the next day police shot dead the suspect, Abdul Ballout, 21, described as an Islamist. Three people were shot dead at the Bite of Seattle food festival. Gunther von Hagens, the German showman who preserved corpses to put on public display, died aged 81.

In India, the Cockroach Janta party protest movement ended its five-week protest after Dharmendra Pradhan resigned as education minister. President Mohammed Shahabuddin of Bangladesh resigned and Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister sentenced to death in her absence, said she would return. Shares in ChangXin Memory Technologies surged on their launch on the Shanghai stock exchange. Globally tech shares slumped. An earthquake of 6.8 magnitude hit Kyushu island in Japan and trapped many in a collapsed shopping centre. More than 5,500 were confirmed dead from the Venezuelan earthquake of 24 June; tens of thousands of bodies had not been recovered. Uefa, the European football governing body, reacted angrily to a plan by Gianni Infantino of Fifa to sell commercial rights to its tournaments, including the World Cup, to private investors. CSH

DIARY

Lawrence Osborne

Why do novelists set their stories in cities or landscapes which seem to haunt them? Not the places of their childhood – an obvious choice – or places they've researched because those places are intellectually attractive. The places they can't avoid in their own subconscious. I'm often asked this question because the places I write about are considered exotic. But to me, it's the reverse. I write about a city long after I've lived there and left it, having never had any intention to write about it at all. Such was the case, for me, with Istanbul. I moved there in 2011 after 20 years in New York. It came about by chance. My mother died that year and I came back to Brighton to attend the service. There was a week's lugubrious interval between service and cremation, during which *Newsweek* asked me to fly to Madrid to interview Pedro Almodovar. This seemed like bad taste until my sister argued that, to the contrary, it was exactly what my mother would have wanted. So I went. Almodovar was charming and subjected me to a day of casual psychoanalysis. 'Tell me,' he said, 'about your mother.' Then we talked about next steps. Don't go back to New York, he insisted. 'Go somewhere different. Move on.'

When a Turkish friend offered a small flat in the basement of her mother's house in Etiler in the northern suburbs of Istanbul, I called my landlord in Brooklyn and asked him to throw all my belongings into the street. No money needed. And so I became a migrant Istanboulli for a year and a half, equipped with a single suitcase and a laptop. My new landlord was a painter whose husband was in a coma after a heart attack – and so in a sense we were both in mourning. The little street high on the hill overlooked the village of Arnavutkoy and the sea. Every morning at five the amplified call to prayer from the mosque wafted up to my garden of pear trees, a beautiful reminder of death, submission to fate and the duty to carry on living.

Winding roads led down to Bebek on the other side, that seaside enclave of the Istanbul rich, and I soon found a daily rhythm walking down to the Hotel Bebek in the late afternoon to take a sundown cocktail on its deck amid swarms of jellyfish. Solitude refound. I didn't know anyone in the city; the phone had gone silent as soon as I left New York. Winter came, great Siberian snowstorms, and via email I began to receive mysterious invitations to dinners and parties and gatherings, as if a telepathic curiosity about a shadowed loner in a basement in Etiler had leaked out to the wider city.

Sometimes a new city can be like this. You either stay alone for years or else circles of new people suddenly open up, people you had never known about before. In this case, the one person I did know was Tamara, daughter of the Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi. I had dined with her father at his mansion in Beirut at an awkward dinner with Christopher Hitchens during which we had learned a great deal about the water table in Iraq and – astonishingly – Hitchens had not uttered a word. Tamara was a different world: young, sophisticated bohemia. Perhaps she was the door that opened Istanbul. Perhaps my landlady had passed on my name: I can't remember.

During that winter I became close with two characters straight out of Lawrence Durrell's *Justine* – Ezgi Esma, a beautiful young film actress, and her lover Sebastien de Courtois, one of the great scholars of eastern Christianity. Fourteen years later, as I was writing *Children of Wolves*, that time came back to me. They were friends of the billionaire Omer Koc, Turkey's greatest art collector and reputedly 10 per cent of the country's GDP. Boats were sent to collect us from Karakoy to ferry us to his Ottoman palace to while away nights on his terrace and – bewildered slightly, not knowing the laws of gravity of this society – I began to feel both less and more alien.

I loved walking around the city at night with Sebastien, going to Ali Pasa hamam (designed by Sinan and built by the enslaved Cervantes), eating late at Lokantasi Karakoy, climbing up to the Galata tower, where our friend the legendary musician Julien Weiss had his apartment and where he played with his qanun ensemble for however many hours the Sufic mood lasted. Weiss was one of the most famous players of that instrument in the Arab world – his school in Aleppo destroyed by Assad's artillery. We used to prowl with him, too, in his long black cloaks. He died in 2015 and so, I suppose, did my relationship with the city. For one always moves on – the places inhabited and loved turned into memory. Or, as the case may be, these little grenade-filled toys called novels.

Lawrence Osborne's Children of Wolves *is out on 6 August.*

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Will Burnham crack and call an election?

When Dwight D. Eisenhower had to decide whether to launch the D-Day armada he kept a close eye on the weather. Pick the wrong moment and the entire cause of winning the war would have been set back and the lives of 135,000 soldiers imperilled.

The supreme allied commander, head of a fractious coalition riven by egos and infighting (you see where I'm going here), had plenty of expert advice, as is made clear in David Haig's play *Pressure*. The British meteorologist, James Stagg, warned that the original date for D-Day, 5 June 1944, would be storm-ridden, but saw a window of opportunity the next day. The American meteorologist Irving P. Krick was more gung-ho and urged Eisenhower not to postpone. Ultimately, the decision was Eisenhower's alone. Walter Bedell Smith, his chief of staff, wrote later: 'I never realised before the loneliness and isolation of a commander at a time when such a momentous decision has to be taken.'

I thought about all this as I watched the brief flicker of uncertainty in the eyes of Andy Burnham when Laura Kuenssberg asked him whether he was prepared to rule out a general election before 2029. Burnham's aides are adamant, consistent and emphatic: 'It is A.B.'s settled view,' one says, that there will be no early election. But Burnham's hesitation was that of a man calculating the trade-off between survival now and long-term freedom of manoeuvre.

There was a look, a pause, then: 'I'm going to rule it out, yeah… There's no early general election. I don't think people want it. The opinion polls say some people do, some people don't.' He was focused on 'getting the country back where it should be, getting it working'. This was more or less what Gordon Brown said in 2007 before he bottled the 'election that wasn't' and more or less what Theresa May said in 2017 until she went for it. Burnham is a good communicator and I think he communicated exactly what he thinks – the policy is that there will be no election, unless the policy changes.

As I watched, I recalled the words of a senior Labour strategist a few days before Burnham entered No. 10: 'No matter what I'm telling you at the time – and I will be telling you that there's no way we are going to do it – if we have a steady five-to-eight-point lead, I will be telling him to go for it.'

Several sources claim James Purnell, the Downing Street chief of staff, is keener on an election than Burnham. But literally everyone I have spoken to inside government and close to it is clear that no preparations are being made. 'Before the election that never was [in 2007] spads were asked to save government info on personal files, and they haven't been,' the former adviser notes.

But glance at the polls, the nearest thing politicians have to a weather forecast. More in Common put Labour on 28 per cent, four points ahead of Nigel Farage's party and six clear of the Tories – Labour's first lead since March last year and their highest vote share since November 2024. The Green vote share has collapsed to 8 per cent. Now consider the views of Deborah Mattinson, pollster to both Starmer and Brown. She says political bounces last only six months and tend to peak three to four months after a new leader is installed. This is James Stagg's window of clement weather.

The trade-off is between survival now and long-term freedom of manoeuvre

Burnham has shown he is adept at retail politics on energy prices and bus fares, but £1 a week off your electricity is a momentum shifter, not a solution. The good vibes will fade when John Healey unveils a Budget. The PM wants to enact the biggest transformation of the state since Margaret Thatcher, much of which would benefit from a new manifesto and a new mandate. Burnham gambled his career to fight Makerfield, seeking a bigger prize, so he has form.

Gambles don't always work, even if you are a successful gambler. Ask David Cameron, who won the leadership, the AV referendum, the Scottish referendum and the 2015 election before his luck ran out. This would be even higher stakes. Like Eisenhower, Burnham would effectively be gambling with the (political) lives of Labour MPs.

'Andy Burnham will rescue us.'

He currently has a working majority of 166. If you offered him a majority of 66 (Blair's margin in 2005) he might well take it. But that means 50 Labour MPs losing their seats, and double that number would fear doing so. For a man known as a 'people-pleaser', it seems an almost insurmountable hurdle. A former No. 10 adviser notes: 'I don't think the survivors would ever forgive Andy.'

A campaign would also bring its own problems. A wise Labour source explains: 'Imagine for a second what the tax section of a new Burnham manifesto would look like. As soon as there is one word of difference from Labour's pledges in 2024, the entire election becomes about that. But if there is no difference, what is the point of calling an election? It is a complete lose-lose scenario.'

But the Tories don't want an election, because they want three more years for the public to forget past failures in government. Farage says he does, but one prominent Reformer argues: 'Reform is a mess at present. The PM should use his conference speech to outline a future under Burnham and go to the country and catch Reform UK cold. We won't have a fully prepared manifesto. There are likely to be some eyebrow-raising candidate scandals that can distract from Nigel's messaging and rattle him, while Burnham is all smiles.'

History tells us that Stagg was right. The storm he predicted swept in on 5 June, followed by the break in the weather he foresaw on the 6th. 'I don't like it, but we have to go,' Eisenhower concluded.

I doubt Burnham will draw the same conclusion. There is a legion of good reasons why he will not. It may be for the good of the country that Burnham's leftist economic instincts are stuck in the straitjacket imposed by the 2024 manifesto and Rachel Reeves's fiscal rules. But if you think the halting answer he gave to Kuenssberg is the last word, I've got a bridge to sell you. When parliament returns on 1 September it may look, for the benefit of his own political project, as if he should go for it.

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THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

In my belated quest to develop a faint sense of what AI is doing, I have just read Sebastian Mallaby's book *The Infinity Machine*, about the greatest British AI wizard, Demis Hassabis, boss of DeepMind. The numerous passages I did not understand are my fault, not Mallaby's. The book is admirably lucid. All I can record, which may slightly help others dipping their toes in the shallow end, is two contradictory impressions. The first is of foreboding. When thinking about AI, we are talking as much about its human creators as about the machines themselves. These creators are almost all men (there are only four women in the book's entire index), and a certain type of man at that. They resemble clever boys – especially American clever boys, even when they are not actually American. (Mallaby, though British, writes his British-published book in American throughout.) They tend to have come into the world of AI via games – chess, Go, video games, and ones I have never heard of called things like Pong. They love go-karting. Mallaby's description of the male type (specifically, Mustafa 'Moose' Suleyman) is 'a brash and brilliant autodidact'. Such men are mostly ahistorical and inclined to seek perfect solutions. Hassabis, though clearly one of the humane ones, says he wants to 'assemble a council of the hundred wisest people from all corners of the Earth', not seeing the utter unwisdom of such utopian thought. Sam Altman of Open AI recently spoke of bringing up his surrogate son by his same-sex marriage, saying: 'I cannot imagine figuring out how to raise a newborn without ChatGPT.' You have to be a particularly stupid type of clever man to think that way: how has the rest of the human race managed for its entire existence? Also like clever boys, the AI titans are fantastically competitive. Their lives are consumed by an arms race for the latest 'agent'. Some seem crazy and their billions can only make them crazier. One, Larry Page, attacks Elon Musk (!) for being a 'speciesist' who wishes the human race to continue rather than be replaced by brainier machines. It is terrifying. Bad actors spot advantage. 'The one who becomes leader in AI will be the ruler of the world,' said Vladimir Putin in 2017. China has its DeepSeek: we could be in DeepDo-do.

My second reaction, however, is that these wizards are indeed seeking after truth (as well as dollars and glory) and we need to consider the possibility that they are finding it. The biggest of Hassabis's big ideas is Artificial *General* Intelligence (AGI) which is achieving 'singularity', the point when machine intelligence surpasses human intelligence. What all these game players are good at is pattern recognition, and they have constructed machines which 'weaponise' that ability. One's instinct revolts, but what if it is true that, as Hassabis put it in his speech accepting his Nobel Prize, 'Any pattern that can be generated or found in nature can be efficiently discovered and modelled by a classical learning algorithm' ('classical' here used to distinguish it from 'quantum')? A religiously motivated financial backer of Hassabis says AGI 'is really God's algorithm'. Another DeepMinder speaks of 'the foresight of the algorithm' and adds, convincingly: 'It's only to a lesser intelligence [i.e. people] that it seems magical.' I am attracted by the school of thought in AI which says, 'Language is enough', and sees AI as learning from us the way we learn, only much better. But Mallaby also quotes Oppenheimer: 'Technology happens because it's possible.' No form of intelligence guarantees that what is possible is good.

Robert Bush, the funeral director from Hull, is being sentenced after pleading guilty to 67 criminal charges. One concerned a baby stillborn at 20 weeks. He told the mother he had cremated her son's remains. In fact, he had kept them in a paper bag in his funeral parlour for nearly two years. His inaction and lies caused great anguish and public disgust. Let me add a wider context, which does nothing to diminish Bush's evil, but may provoke thought. Approximately 280,000 abortions are performed in Britain every year. Of these, about 2 per cent are of foetuses at or over 20 weeks (the normal legal limit being 23 weeks and six days). Thus more than 5,000 foetuses like the one Bush dishonoured are disposed of annually without ceremony, or formal means of mourning, let alone a criminal charge, and most people seem not to worry about it at all.

In Hong Kong, a free press no longer exists. Jimmy Lai, its most famous defender, languishes in prison. All the more need, one would have thought, for brave BBC coverage there to continue. Last month, however, the BBC made five long-serving editorial staff in its Hong Kong bureau redundant, without stated reasons. Several had complained of bullying and their bosses' growing reluctance to report stories displeasing to the Beijing-controlled government. One who oversaw the sackings is called Vikram Gopinath. Before this role, his LinkedIn profile shows, he worked for 12 years for CGTN, the Chinese state broadcaster. CGTN, needless to say, frequently attacked BBC coverage of Hong Kong issues. It is banned in Britain. Do the bosses at New Broadcasting House know what is happening?

Driving to a party last weekend, we switched on Radio 3 in the car and were immediately bored by a non-classical concert. In desperation, we tried Radio 3 Unwind, the special sedative channel which treats music as therapy not art and whose announcers have voices like the villains in old-fashioned films who say: 'You're feeling sleepy.' Suddenly, after a bit of Mahler, such a voice said: 'Are your teeth touching?' Did we clench our jaws, she asked. Then she told us how to reduce tension by retracting our tongues and pushing them up against our palettes. We tried this until our laughter nearly rocked us off the road.

Class warfare

The dire consequences of Labour's battle against private schools

LARA BROWN

St Joseph's College in Reading survived two world wars, the Great Depression and a pandemic. But it could not weather two years under this Labour government. Next month, its 500 pupils will be among thousands across the country who do not return to the schools from which they broke up for the summer holidays. These are the casualties of the government's decision to impose VAT on private school fees and remove business rate relief – a policy ministers promised would not have such consequences.

We still haven't seen the full effects of Labour's recklessness. The true damage will take time to set in. We know that during the financial crisis, parents struggling to pay fees avoided moving their children until they reached a natural break in their education: the end of primary school, GCSEs or a key stage. Governors exhaust every alternative before admitting defeat, pursuing mergers, selling assets and cutting costs in the hope of surviving another year. But the rot has set in, and faster than expected.

Century-old Victorian institutions are closing or morphing into unrecognisable organisations. It will not be long before we are left with a sector transformed: a small number of globally elite schools with fees so high they function only as finishing schools for the rich; parents obtaining certificates proving their child has deficiencies which cannot be accommodated in the state sector; and a handful of religious and eccentric schools able to obtain funding outside of normal fees.

The Department for Education (DfE) initially predicted that 14,000 pupils would leave the private sector by this summer. So far, the figure is 30,000 pupils, at least. Sarah Cunnane, from the Independent Schools Council, describes the rate of closures as 'very concerning' and suggests that healthy schools, which 'would have been open for years to come' and which were not previously in financial trouble, are at risk.

The changes to VAT and business rate relief did not land in isolation. Schools have also had to absorb the increase in employer national insurance contributions (NICs) and the minimum wage, both introduced in April last year. State schools received additional public funding to offset the higher NIC bill; independent schools did not. For a sector where staffing accounts for the majority of costs, the effect has been severe.

Proponents of charging VAT only want to talk about Eton and Harrow. But Britain's elite public schools were never going to fall victim to this policy. These schools know they can pass on costs to parents. And if British parents can't pay, there is no shortage of wealthier international families who will stump up to secure a British education.

Girls' schools are disproportionately struggling. More than twice as many have closed as boys' schools

Richer schools have also been cushioned by endowments and donations. The regional pattern is revealing: 9.6 per cent of mainstream independent schools in the East Midlands have closed since January last year, compared with 3.9 per cent in London and 3.6 per cent in the south-west.

Girls' schools are also disproportionately struggling. More than twice as many have closed as boys' schools. Girls' schools are often newer and lack historic funds. In an attempt to avoid closure, many single-sex institutions have been forced to pivot to a co-educational model. Cheryl Giovannoni, the chief executive of the Girls' Day School Trust, warns that these changes risk 'girls becoming something of an afterthought in the decisions about what is best for them, and how their futures will be defined'.

Durham High was one of the schools that became co-ed shortly after the introduction of VAT, but this was not enough to save it from closure last month. A former member of the board of directors notes that the school wasn't well endowed, and that it 'was the plumbers and the sparkies and the scaffolders' who paid the fees, with a significant number of pupils on assisted places. He speaks of the 'tremendous pride and admiration' he had for the staff, who during lockdown were unique 'among both private and state schools in the area in continuing to deliver the full curriculum'.

Durham High's fees ranged from £14,475 to £19,323 a year – comparably modest for day education in the region. Parents will struggle to find a similar local offering for their children.

The school was owned by Galaxy Global Education, controlled by Shangqin Gao, a Chinese businesswoman. The group has recently purchased a number of English schools and closed three of them down, including Malvern St James in the West Midlands and Ruthin School in Wales, all with little notice, leaving pupils without a school place and teachers without work.

Labour's Mary Kelly Foy has accused the company of a land grab. Because private schools are a rapidly declining asset, it may make far more sense from a commercial perspective to buy them and sell off their grounds to developers. Galaxy denies that this was its strategy, claiming that the schools were unable to operate against the backdrop of 'unprecedented pressures'.

When governors are struggling to make ends meet and reconcile rising costs, they

often look to a sale to save the school. More than 30 independent schools have been sold to Chinese investors in the past decade. As more schools battle insolvency, that number is likely to rise. But these buyers are far more ruthless than a governor team made up of parents and community figures. They aren't interested in a school's history and may choose closure if the value of an institution's assets outstrips its profit-making potential.

Private equity funds now also dominate the educational landscape, which may seem strange since the sector is dogged by mounting overheads. But these firms have hit on a way to make money against the backdrop of VAT.

The one growth sector in private education is special needs. This is because children in possession of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), which states they have needs that can only be met in a private school, will have their fees paid in full by the local council, ensuring no fall in pupil numbers. The council can also claim the VAT back. As of February this year, 30 per cent of independent special schools were backed

Private equity funds now dominate the educational landscape

by private equity firms. Roughly a third of these are based outside the UK – in Jersey, Guernsey, the US, Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

There is now a strong incentive for families previously paying for education to obtain an EHCP to retain a private school place. The former education secretary Damian Hinds has pointed out that many families are likely to 'find that they cannot afford the extra 20 per cent, so they will apply for an EHCP and the child could get placed back in the same school, with the entire cost now being picked up by the state'.

There are currently 538,547 pupils with an EHCP, up 11.6 per cent from 2025. While not all of these plans will require councils to pay for private education, many will, and it is conceivable that more parents have sought them to ensure council funding for their children's education because they themselves cannot afford to pay increased fees.

The DfE claims that there is no scandal in the story of school closures. Its often trotted-out line is that 'more private schools opened than closed' since VAT was introduced. This may be technically true, but it misses how the sector is drifting away from its roots. Eighty-four per cent of schools which have closed were mainstream. Many were centuries-old centres of academic excellence, while 89 per cent of openings are special schools.

We have replaced Malory Towers with another exercise in infantilisation, placing large numbers of children in a state of learned helplessness by sending them to institutions specialising in ADHD, dyslexia or 'emotional difficulties'. Meanwhile, England's exceptional schools are struggling. The Purcell School, Yehudi Menuhin School and Chetham's School of Music – where, respectively, Jacob Collier, Nicola Benedetti and Thangam Debbonaire, Labour's former shadow culture secretary, trained – have all been hit by VAT and business rate relief changes.

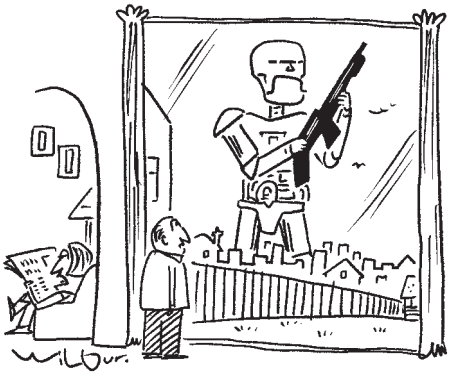
Specialist music and dance schools are among the most vulnerable to government vandalism. Due to their participation in the DfE's Music and Dance Scheme, which provides income-determined grants, many of these schools effectively have their fees set by the government. They cannot simply hike them to cover rising costs. They are also among the most expensive schools in the country to run. Students require one-on-one teaching and extensive contact hours. Class sizes are small and boarding is necessary to house so many talented students in one place.

Baroness Keeley has warned that Chetham's in Manchester is in particular 'financial distress' due to 'rising costs and the introduction of VAT on fees'. The school fears it may be forced to close in the next few years. Ninety per cent of Chetham's pupils receive financial support. Their parents do not have extra money lying around to finance VAT hikes. It is also one of the only music schools of its calibre in the north of England.

The Royal Ballet School also faces financial threat. The school requires a pianist for each class and regularly imports costumes from Europe for productions. To cut costs would be to undermine the future of English ballet. One of the school's heads, David Gajadharsingh, has warned that VAT will 'destroy opportunity' for young dancers.

While the government has increased grant funding for these schools, with the Treasury paying itself back some of the tax hike, the money isn't enough to cover rising costs and is only applied to families earning less than £45,000 per annum. The principal of the Purcell School has identified a £4 million shortfall in funding, in part caused by VAT and business relief changes.

Labour told us that it was taxing private schools to fund the recruitment of 6,500 additional teachers. But the number of full-time equivalent teachers in England's state-funded schools has fallen by 1,900. And the policy might not even be revenue-raising at all. In Scotland, the VAT raid has already cost more than it raised. Every child that moves into the state education sector does so at a cost of £8,850 to the public purse. The policy's net fiscal gain is slowly being eroded by that cost.



'Should we be concerned about AI going rogue?'

What has Labour actually achieved? It has forced the closure of at least 78 schools, 87 per cent of which weren't selective. It has robbed 8,429 pupils of their school places. It has forced girls' schools to abandon the single-sex principles on which they were founded. Where we once had Victorian institutions, we will now have Chinese-owned schools vulnerable to asset stripping, and private equity-backed special schools sucking at the taxpayer's teat.

The policy has made Britain one of only two countries in the world to tax children's education like a consumer service. It is also one of the only times that the government has removed tax relief from a whole class of charities – paving the way for future policy. If the government doesn't like what your charity provides, it is now free to remove relief and with it your ability to function.

If ministers wanted to raise revenue, why did they bring in VAT changes in the middle of a school year, with just five months' warning? Would it not have made more sense to allow private schools to prepare for lost revenue? And why did it bring down the second blow of business-rate relief removal three months later?

Specialist music and dance schools are among the most vulnerable to government vandalism

None of this should surprise us, though. Bridget Phillipson, the former education secretary, has said she is 'not the only spiteful class warrior out there' and showed off T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan. Lucy Powell, the recently appointed Education Secretary, was waging a war on private education long before she got the job. In 2016 she opposed an Independent Schools Council proposal to introduce 10,000 free private school places at the same cost to the government of sending a child to state school. She told the Conservatives to stop 'fixating on independent and grammar schools as silver bullets to school improvement'.

Under Jeremy Corbyn, Labour wanted to abolish private schools. Now it might not even need to bother. A sector too depleted to offer bursaries, unable to train the next generation of musicians and dancers and increasingly dependent on foreign capital may simply cease to exist in the form Britain has known for generations.

‘He’s either the Messiah – or the Antichrist’

On the Clacton campaign trail with Nigel Farage

JAMES HEALE

‘We love you, Nigel!’ In Clacton-on-Sea, there is little sign that the Reform leader’s star has waned. Campaigning with Farage here is a burst of cackles, quips, nicotine and selfies: a march through sun-kissed streets with a cast of canvassers, aides and minders.

A child clasping a teddy bear dances around, Reform’s rosette pinned to her top; a groaning assistant clutches two dozen poster boards. On the doors in Seawick, there is near-universal support, with variations on the theme which Farage has made his campaign slogan: ‘I’m with Nigel.’

In the middle of silly season, Clacton is hosting one of Britain’s most bizarre by-elections. Amid a barrage of unfavourable stories about financial gifts and past support, Farage quit parliament last month, saying i t was for voters to judge his actions rather than journalists.

He wanted a proper contest – yet the Tories, Labour and Lib Dems all refused to play ball. They argue he will soon face a second by-election anyway, via the parliamentary watchdog. Farage now faces joke candidates: Count Binface, three Monster Raving Loonies and the actor Laurence Fox. In SW1 he may face ridicule – but here in Essex, he is embraced.

If there is such a thing as Nigeland then it is to be found in Clacton. The streets are a medley of horns as sole traders drive past and signal their support. One pulls up for the full Farage patter. ‘How are you? Good, good. Running your own business? Working hard, paying tax? Because we want to get VAT thresholds up and all the rest of it, you know. You gonna support me? Good man, good man. I’ll give you a poster.’ Farage loves to be on the doors: cajoling, charming, glad-handing, grinning. The residents, his people, confide their concerns: council cock-ups, drug dealers on bikes and illegal migrants next door.

A group of gawping children cluster round. ‘Can I get a picture?’ says one. ‘Are you famous?’ asks another. ‘On a good day,’ smiles Farage, dressed in purple, pink and blue. He spots one girl clutching an e-cigarette. ‘Vaping already? That’s terrible, isn’t it…’ ‘You were on the fags by then,’ laughs an aide. A trio of cheeky teenagers later stop him on the street, all requesting selfies. ‘Nigel Farage, I love you man,’ says one. ‘Stop the boats!’ cries another. The actual election and its rights or wrongs rarely come up on the doorstep. ‘It’s the most binary contest ever,’ remarks one canvasser. ‘He’s either the Messiah – or the Antichrist.’

Those he meets are more likely to mention a short video, released that day, of a woman crashing her car seconds after shouting ‘wanker’ at Farage. Within 24 hours, it had become Reform’s most-watched clip of all time. At one house, a lady comes out and giggles that she had heckled him, but ‘I wasn’t swearing, I promise.’

‘It’s her! It’s her, we found her!’ chortles Farage. ‘That is the best follow-up content ever,’ exalts his press man, Dan Jukes, bouncing around in a pink Farage football shirt. ‘That’s another million views.’

‘I don’t dump trusted friends unless they betray me – it’s as simple as that’

Occasionally, reality punctures the ideal. As Farage is embraced by an Indian woman, her neighbour looks on suspiciously. She enquires what is going on. ‘Reform door-knocking,’ I reply, unhelpfully. Disgust crosses her face. ‘It would be really great if you could piss off.’ ‘You get a mix,’ sighs a veteran aide. ‘It’s a kaleidoscope,’ murmurs another. ‘Absolutely disgusting,’ the woman yells, voice swelling, as the cavalcade marches by. ‘You’re only showing your face around here now, after you took all that money? Get outta our streets!’

Farage is unfazed: onward he presses, to the next supporter. Behind him follows a van, dropping off billboards. With 10,000 voters expected to be on holiday on polling day, Farage needs to drum up awareness. He wants Thursday 13 August to be billed as ‘Clacton vs the Establishment’. ‘I’m asking *you* to be my judge,’ he tells one lady, ‘and not the mainstream media in London.’

For him, the lack of opposition has proved to be a ‘godsend’, giving Reform ‘our chance, uncontested, to have conversations with people, to find out who our real supporters were, who our soft supporters were… By 13 August, we will have a map of this constituency that is astonishing.’

After three hours, it’s time for the pub. Over a pint of ale, Farage marvels at the collective decision of the main parties not to stand. ‘It was the uniparty, literally the uniparty,’ he says. ‘The reaction was that of the uniparty and talking up Binface. Extraordinary.’ Fighting this seat uncontested has given him weeks to obtain data. ‘They’ve made a huge error, huge error. They potentially freed me up for the general election.’ He will be able to tour the rest of the country in the knowledge his own seat is secure.

Farage juggles his campaign with wider party management. The shadow cabinet will shortly be expanded with ‘two or three more to come at conference’. He dismisses headlines about his £5 million gift from billionaire Christopher Harborne in 2024. ‘Ann Widdecombe’s death is five million good reasons, isn’t it?’ He reveals he went ‘under the knife’ for abdominal surgery the day before she was murdered. ‘The spooky thing is, of course, she was killed in the middle of defending me,’ he says. ‘She’d done two interviews that morning. Had another one coming up, all defending me. That’s a very, very strange feeling. I adored her.’

He expresses bemusement at recent reports about support given to him by his friend George Cottrell. ‘This “Posh George” stuff. I mean, what are they even on about? Of course, he’s a *Tatler* figure, an interesting bloke and a colourful guy. But these are trusted friends. I don’t dump trusted friends unless they betray me – it’s as simple as that.’

He is clear: his style of party leadership will not change. ‘I will keep doing what I do. And I will allow others to do what they want to do and give them enormous freedom to do things.’

With that, it is on to thanking activists, filming videos and debating the Metric Martyrs. Punters at the bar ask him for selfies; outside a vendor offers him a ‘Nigel burger’. In Westminster, there may be clouds, but here in Clacton, for now, it’s all sunshine.

‘Look, isn’t that Bill Oddie?’

DOUGLAS MURRAY

Get over your imposter syndrome

I have spent part of the past week thinking about imposter syndrome, and how we might be able to give it to more people. In an interview this week, Andy Burnham's best friend Steve Rotheram, who happens to be the Mayor of Liverpool, said that our latest Prime Minister had struggled with imposter syndrome 'for many years, like most people from working-class backgrounds'.

All of which leaves me slightly baffled. Surely, whatever your origins, if you have made it to Cambridge University in your late teens, got a job in Westminster in your early twenties, become a Member of Parliament in your thirties, have become a mayor, are best friends with a mayor and are now Prime Minister, it might be time to stop with the feeling of 'imposter syndrome'? Unless, of course, you are an imposter, in which case you should have a huge dose of the syndrome, acknowledge it and remove yourself from public life. Which I am sure is not the case with Andy Burnham.

Such talk is yet another example of the medicalisation and pathologising of what we used to call 'life'. Do some people feel that they are in positions, or even rooms, in which they should not be, or in which they feel vaguely out of place? Of course. It is a syndrome commonly associated with the teenage years. But any sensible person updates their mental software as they go through life. The first time Burnham dined in hall as an undergraduate at Cambridge would have been the moment to stop thinking of himself as an imposter. The same with the early years of being an MP or even a minister in Gordon Brown's cabinet. Surely there is a time in the seamless rise of Burnham when you realise that there are no rooms you are being kept out of? You are the room.

Yet there seems to be an inexorable left-wing desire to paint things in this light. The late John Prescott was a master at it, railing against the Establishment and all those toffs in positions of power while being the deputy prime minister.

Perhaps the example of Prescott is more a case of what we used to call 'chippiness' than imposter syndrome. But even chippiness is something that has a vaguely left-wing bent. I know quite a lot of chippy people. I can be a little chippy myself at times. But as I always say to people who complain to me about their chippiness, it is the sort of thing you can turn to your advantage. In my observation, ever-so-slightly chippy people have a superpower in life if they use their chip in the right way. If they decide that they've been held back, that they are a victim of the fates and that their life is essentially not in their own hands, then they tend to make a hash of their life. But if they use that little bit of flint it can become a superpower. I've certainly seen a number of people with a nice constructive little chip on their shoulder far outrun the sort of people who are pleasantly adjusted and at peace with the world.

Ever-so-slightly chippy people have a superpower in life if they use their chip in the right way

This brings me to the case of Natalie Fleet MP, who was appointed by Keir Starmer to be his minister for safeguarding. Just over a week ago she resigned her position, saying that once she started to get on top of her portfolio and read the cases of women who needed protecting, she found the contents 'overwhelmingly triggering'. She announced that she could therefore not perform the task. Victims deserved someone 'at their best', she said, while describing resigning from being the minister for safeguarding as the 'bravest thing I've ever done'.

As in the talk of 'imposter syndrome', my suspicion is that reactions to Fleet's resignation will depend on your political leanings.

'My anxiety levels have gone through the roof.'

Left-wingers seem overwhelmingly likely to sympathise with her, wish her well on her journey and say that she has been stunning and brave given her own past trauma. It reminds me of the reaction to the American gymnast Simone Biles, who withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics a few years back because she said she needed to focus on her mental health. 'We're human, too,' she said of Olympians.

Then, as now, there were large numbers of people who applauded Biles. She had been brave in admitting her vulnerability, they said. In putting herself before her Olympic team, she had shown people how we should all prioritise ourselves.

Yet some of us have a slightly different reaction to such things. I personally think the job of an Olympian is to be more than human, to perform feats that make the rest of us gasp and to sublimate yourself to the greater task. Likewise, I think the job of a safeguarding minister is to focus on the traumas of others.

But this is not how things are currently weighted. Perhaps as an overreaction to the years of repression, we now celebrate anyone who shows their 'vulnerability', which is well and good, but only goes so far. At some point people also have to be good at things, whatever their circumstances or origins.

Which brings me, finally, to Angela Rayner. The Housing Secretary who didn't understand stamp duty is back. In an interview with Trevor Phillips last weekend she was asked how being Housing Secretary this time is going to be different from the time before. She said this time the Labour government is going to build more council houses. Pushed for a number, Rayner managed to summon up the figure of 12,000, which didn't sound like very many.

Then I checked the latest figures for small-boat arrivals and saw that more than 12,000 people have crossed the Channel illegally by dinghy this year alone. So if Rayner's highest aspirations are met, in a few years' time we might be able to house the people who arrived in recent months.

Again, my question is not just why some people experience imposter syndrome, but why so many people who should experience it do not.

Spell bound

Is there really such a thing as a sporting curse?

PATRICK KIDD

My father had been waiting his entire life for that whistle. After 75 years, the curse was over. Mayo were Gaelic football champions having overturned the second-biggest deficit in the history of All-Ireland finals. The county hadn't seen such a miracle since Father Horan got the taoiseach to fund an international airport near the shrine of Our Lady of Knock.

Three months before Dad was born in Castlebar, Mayo won the 1951 title. Their celebrations on the way home were exuberant and, so the legend goes, disrupted a funeral in Foxford. The furious priest (some versions blame the widow) cast a curse on them, saying Mayo would never again lift the Sam Maguire Cup while any of those players lived.

Nonsense, right? Except that Mayo then lost 11 finals, four by one point. Fifteen days after the 2021 final, Paddy Prendergast died, the last of those who had played in the 1951 side. Only Mick Loftus, an unused substitute, remained, and when he died in 2023 Mayo fans hoped the curse had also expired. It didn't look good when they fell seven points behind Kerry after 15 minutes on Sunday, their first final since 2021, but they reeled them in, taking the lead in the second half and clinging on for catharsis.

Sport loves a curse. We saw it at the recent football World Cup when a witch doctor claimed before Ghana played England that he had used his magic to prevent Harry Kane from scoring. Uri Geller promised to counter it with his mentalism, but he was better at bending spoons than free kicks. The game finished 0-0. The witch doctor then lifted his curse and Kane scored four more goals.

Derby County fans once believed that their team had been cursed by gypsies who were moved off land that became the club's ground in 1895. Derby reached six FA Cup semi-finals in the next eight years, losing in three finals. Their next final came in 1946, before which the club apologised to the gypsy community. It may have helped since the ball (and the curse?) burst at 1-1 and Derby beat Charlton Athletic 4-1.

Birmingham City also suffered under a gypsy curse, which one manager, Ron Saunders, tried to banish by placing crucifixes under the floodlights, while another, Barry Fry, followed the suggestion of a clairvoyant to urinate on all four corners of the pitch. Perhaps they should try it at Benfica. Bela Guttmann managed them to two European Cup titles, then was sacked in 1962. He stormed off, saying that the Portuguese club would not be European champions again for a century. They are 64 years in and still waiting.

There is the ludicrous claim that every time Wales win the grand slam in rugby, a Pope dies

In baseball, the Curse of the Bambino supposedly prevented the Boston Red Sox from winning the World Series for 86 years after selling Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees. The Chicago Cubs blamed a 71-year run of failure on the Curse of the Billy Goat after a publican was banned from Wrigley Field in 1945 because his goat, Murphy, was bothering others. He told the owner that no one insulted his goat and got away with it. The Cubs lost that year's World Series 4-3 and didn't reach another until 2016.

Other sporting curses include the one that says golf's Masters will never be won by the winner of the par-three competition the day before – some players fluff their final hole to avoid the jinx – or the Crucible curse by which every first-time winner of snooker's World Championship does badly the following year. Then there is the ludicrous claim that every time Wales win the grand slam in rugby, a Pope dies. In fact, it has happened only twice and the way that Wales are playing Leo XIV should not expect a short reign.

There are plenty of non-sporting curses, of course, from the deaths of those who disturbed Tutankhamun to the tragic fate of the Kennedys to Gustav Mahler's fear that he would die after nine symphonies like Beethoven and Bruckner. He died while writing his tenth. There's also one concerning a Native American chief cursing William Henry Harrison that any US president elected in a year ending in zero would die in office. This happened to seven successive men before Ronald Reagan avoided it, though he was shot.

But there's something special about superstition in sport. You often hear of players having to put their socks on in the same order or eat the same meal during a tournament. During the 2019 cricket World Cup final, Mark Wood sat on the washing machine in the laundry room at Lord's for 30 overs in case moving brought bad luck. He wasn't the first England player to be wary of a spinner.

Such concerns are silly. It is easier to blame a hex than your own failings. There are no such things as curses. Except that Mayo have just lifted the Sam Maguire for the first time since old Paddy Prendergast died and it makes you wonder…

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Blazing stupidity

Don't blame climate change for moorland wildfires

MATT RIDLEY

Bordeaux and Madrid are threatened by flames. In Sicily, arsonists tied burning rags to the tails of cats to spread fires. Here in Britain the Cairngorms and Peak District national parks are ablaze. It's the climate Armageddon, say the greens. If only we had built more wind farms and eaten fewer cows this would not be happening.

Hot, dry spells undoubtedly make fires more likely, but awkwardly for those blaming climate change, wildfires are getting less frequent worldwide, not more, as the globe warms. The acreage burned has decreased steadily since 2000, according to Nasa's satellites, and is thought to have almost halved in a century. The great fires of 1871 in Wisconsin and Michigan burned more than a million hectares long before anybody drove a car, before even Joseph Swan's first light bulb, when the world was cooler.

It is not just the trend that is surprising. Hard to believe, but this year is an unusually quiet year for wildfire: so quiet it is breaking records for lack of fires by this date, even in Europe. If you don't believe me, check the figures produced by the Global Wildfire Information System: as of last week, the world had seen 106 million hectares burn this year, the lowest at this date since these records began in 2012. In Europe, just 3.6 million hectares have burned – less than half the average for this date. That's cold comfort to people driven from their homes in France, but it is nonetheless a fact.

The real issue is that climate change is a handy excuse for politicians who have failed to take precautionary measures to prevent wildfires. They can just shrug: it's global warming, innit? It has been known for many decades that in fire-prone habitats, the longer you go without a fire, the worse the fires will be. So preventing the build-up of tinder by controlled burns is the most important factor.

It has been known for many decades that the longer you go without a fire, the worse the fires will be

The California filmmaker Gabriel Mann's hard-hitting 2023 documentary *Hotshot* showed in detail how fire suppression has made today's fires harder to control. He has no patience with those who use climate change as an alibi. 'They tell you the sky is falling and it's all the fault of our modern, shitty climate,' he says. 'But when was the climate not shitty?'

Here in Britain the government has consistently and relentlessly demanded less 'cool' burning – low-intensity, controlled fires – in winter on heather moorland, Britain's most fire-prone habitat. Such fires have been used by farmers and gamekeepers for generations to create a mosaic of short and long heather. This encourages fresh young heather shoots for sheep and grouse to feed on and makes open areas for rare birds such as golden plover and curlew to nest in. If done in winter it can burn off the rank heather plants while leaving the moss underneath barely touched, as demonstrated by a famous video in which a gamekeeper places a Mars bar in the moss, lights a fierce fire over it, then picks up the unscorched, unmelted chocolate bar, unwraps it and eats it.

Natural England argues that regular cool burning harms the habitat; researchers at York University and elsewhere argue the opposite: that it encourages the growth of sphagnum moss and other species by let-

JOHN BROADLEY

ting light in. But both sides agree that regular cool burns can dramatically reduce the risk of much more damaging wildfires, which burn down through the moss layer and into the peat. Cutting heather instead is less effective but better than nothing. Yet Natural England has banned heather burning on deep peat altogether and is pushing hard to limit it further everywhere – or at least tie it up in complicated licensing rules. As a result, the fuel load on heather moorland has been increasing; in places the heather is now waist-deep. The National Fire Chiefs Council warned last year that such restrictions on heather management would increase 'the danger to firefighters and the public'.

Unlike private owners, bodies such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the National Trust are refusing to burn and reluctant to graze heather moorland, as they join the cult of 'rewilding'. With the support of government, they plan to mitigate the fire risk by 'rewetting' moors with leaky dams to hold back rainwater. But this approach is useless in a drought.

Case in point: the Tintwistle fire in the Peak District spread from a wild camp in woodland on to a heather moor owned by

Both sides agree that regular cool burns can dramatically reduce the risk of more damaging wildfires

United Utilities and managed by the RSPB. This moor had been extensively 'rewetted' yet it went up like a torch and the fire spread, drowned Manchester in smoke, burned deep into the peat and was only contained – for now – when local gamekeepers and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue used two diggers and a bulldozer to create a firebreak on its northwest flank on the neighbouring Stalybridge estate. But so quick is Natural England to prosecute landowners and gamekeepers for even inadvertently breaking rules about managing habitat that they were anxious they might be punished for doing this.

Richard Bailey, coordinator of the Peak District Moorland Group, estimates that the past month's firefighting by gamekeepers would have cost the taxpayer millions of pounds if done by the fire service. Many long, hot, hard days and nights have left gamekeepers and their families under severe mental strain, alleviated a little by generous food drops from Micklehurst cricket club. You can imagine how much it sticks in the craw for these gamekeepers that they have been working to save land managed by an organisation that makes the risk worse.

The nearby Dovestone fire was also started on RSPB-managed land after a man drowned in the local reservoir and his friends commemorated him with fireworks. The Cairngorms fire too began on land owned by the RSPB at Abernethy. The irony is not lost on locals that the very same people who tell us that climate change is an existential crisis are also the ones urging us to stop using the one tool we know helps to mitigate the problem. If your view is that climate change is a massive threat, why are you pursuing policies that increase fuel load?

The North York Moors fire last year affected 2,500 hectares of moorland, smouldering for more than a month in the peat and releasing vast quantities of carbon dioxide. Yet no Defra minister bothered to visit. The cost of fighting these fires does not fall on their department, so why do they care, says Jamie Blackett, founder of Ground Cry, a new organisation campaigning on behalf of ground-nesting birds like curlews.

The authorities know their policies increase the fire risks. Here is what the Cairngorm National Park says in its Integrated Wildfire Management Plan about plans to increase shrubs and other vegetation by reducing deer and stopping burning: 'These habitats will take many years to develop and during the intervening period fuel loads will increase, as will the corresponding need for fire risk mitigation.' So they knew the risk was increasing. But little was done. John Kirk, a board member of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, told the *Strathspey Herald*: 'Everyone is furious… the entire Abernethy forest has no firebreaks.'

Andrew Gilruth, chief executive of the Moorland Association, says: 'While Scotland has a clear plan to manage the excess vegetation, in England the authorities are obsessed with rewilding and restricting all commonsense measures for reducing fuel loads.'

In May, before the drought, Gilruth wrote to MPs who represent moorland constituencies to point out that the number of firefighters is down by a quarter over the past seven years and that the fire service relies heavily on gamekeepers' vehicles, water bowsers and other equipment. Banning the burning of heather means fewer keepers can justify having such equipment. He described Defra's refusal to change policy on heather burning as reckless.

Sadly he was proved right. So was I. After I warned in these very pages last year that government policy was worsening the fire risk on moorland, it gives me no pleasure to say: 'I told you so.'

'We decided to give France a miss this year.'

BAROMETER

Common ground

The Commonwealth Games began as the British Empire Games in 1930, yet they did not originate in Britain. The event was instigated by a Bobby Robinson, a sports reporter on a local newspaper in Hamilton, Ontario, who also acted as manager for the Canadian track and field team at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. The games were held in his home town, Hamilton, and 11 countries participated: Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland (which meant the Irish Free State as well as Northern Ireland), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, British Guiana, Newfoundland and Bermuda. The only women's events were in swimming. In spite of its small size, the games did inspire one innovation which continues to be used in the Olympics: putting winning medallists on pedestals for the medal ceremony.

Who cares?

Andy Burnham proposed a National Care Service. How many people receive care?
– On 31 December 2025, **685,000** people in England received some sort of adult social care.
– **490,000** of these received care in a community setting, including their homes.
– **140,000** lived in residential care homes.
– **55,000** lived in nursing homes.
– **250** were in prison.
Source: Department of Health and Social Care

Drowning deaths

How many people drown in Britain?
– In 2024 there were **193** confirmed accidental water fatalities, a **51%** fall on the average between 2010 and 2013.
– **61%** were on inland waterways.
– **84%** were men.
– **37%** of those who died were not intending to enter the water, but slipped and fell while doing something else.
– The worst month was May (**28** deaths), followed by August (**25**) and July (**21**).
Source: National Water Safety Forum

Adapt and die

Emily Wilson, whose translation of *The Odyssey* was cited as an influence by Christopher Nolan, said his adaptation was 'abysmal'. Which authors have disliked adaptations of their works?
– **Truman Capote** said *Breakfast at Tiffany's* 'was the most miscast film I've ever seen. It made me want to throw up.'
– **P.L. Travers** cried through *Mary Poppins* and asked: 'Why was Mary Poppins… transmogrified into a soubrette?'
– **Stephen King** said *The Shining* was 'like a big, beautiful Cadillac with no engine inside it'.

BOOKSELLER'S NOTEBOOK

Nicky Dunne

Shepherd Market, W1, has many ghosts, some of whom are literary. In the shadow of Patrick Leigh Fermor's former digs – the scene of 'wild and continuous' parties in the summer of 1933 – Heywood Hill has just celebrated 90 years of bookselling. In today's Republic of Letters, we have a true book-loving Queen and she is a marvel. To mark Heywood Hill's anniversary Her Majesty graciously toured our tiny shop. She talked about her love of all kinds of books (*The Cazalet Chronicles* in particular) and gamely joined Jerry Vinalon and Jay Lomot, our splendid professional book-packers, in helping them gift-wrap parcels. She signed a postcard which one lucky book subscriber should find in their next package.

Not every customer is so fortunate. I love the story of an incensed Christopher Isherwood ringing the shop from California many decades ago, boiling with outrage at our latest invoice and the high cost of postage from London. It did not help his mood that inside his most recent parcel he discovered that our then packer had mistakenly included a very large and heavy hammer.

As HMQ left the shop this month, the irrepressible Jeffrey Archer was waiting outside with a warm greeting. Lord A is well known here. His son William remembers that on his graduation Jeffrey generously opened an unlimited tab for him at Heywood Hill, 'any book that I fancied I could charge to my father's account'. Cue 30 years of boundless reading pleasure.

Enjoyment is what bookselling appears to be all about. Good books and invariably interesting people continuously flow through our shop (just as the old River Tyburn is now piped beneath it). Unlike the faux intimacy of (anti)social media, lolling with my entertaining and talented team in a fast-moving current of bookish acquaintance is pretty

refreshing, and keeps the mind ticking over. I love it. Two really gifted readers have both been colleagues, originally immigrants, one American (and young), the other German (and less so). The first devours well over 200 books a year and she would with great insight summarise any on demand. The other is a high lama of reading, devoted to the mind-expanding possibilities of print, and the nourishing sediments good books settle within.

The broad accessibility of literature is appealing. Book savants may be found anywhere. Another Patrick was a builder, a hard-as-nails foreman on a refurbishment next door. Chatting to him on the pavement one day, he turned to our window saying: 'I see you have some Proust in.' 'Yes we do.' Pause. 'I only read him in the French. And I much prefer Rimbaud.' A bow was offered.

Despite, well, everything, Britain's literary ecology is still just about intact. The Queen is doing all that she can to support it, and imaginatively so. Who else could organise to give away physical copies this Christmas of a very good children's book – Katherine Rundell's *Impossible Creatures* – to every ten-year-old in the country? But in general, the literary landscape is pretty parched and in need of constant watering by book people everywhere. On the bookshop side, there are around 1,000 independents heroically trading up and down the land, each adapted to their own topographical niche.

We are blessed in the habitats Mayfair supports. Never mind the new PM, round here Robin Birley would be a strong candidate for mayor. The sight of Robin perambulating between his exceptional establishments is reassuring for those of us on the front line of retail or hospitality (and we feel like a rare mixture of both). Even Robin's dogs have a high style about them, and he's been known to tip his booksellers too. There's no one like him.

People are usually far more nuanced than how they are seen. Nancy Mitford, the Homeric heroine of our shop's creation myth, took a job here soon after an unexpected hysterectomy. Her panache quickly put the place on the map. In August 1942 she wrote: 'I had a smart set to with Evelyn about *The Marmalade Cat* having gone up to 6/s; however in the end he took it.' Nancy's sister Jessica was the red sheep of her family, emigrating in early 1939 to the United States – pretty gutsy aged 21 – where she became a pioneering journalist. The family scribe is now Jessica's grandson James Forman Jr, a law professor at Yale and author of *Locking Up Our Own*, with a Pulitzer Prize to his name.

A bunch of writers and others – Heywood Hill's charming daughter Harriet, John Saumarez Smith's gifted son George – called in to celebrate our 90th. We met in Shepherd Market, still an atmospheric village largely left alone by tourism, and still full of character and characters. Back in 1933 Patrick L.F. lodged in Number 28. Beatrice Stewart a former artist's model, with a prosthetic metal leg, was his landlady. In her youth she was immortalised by the sculptor Adrian Jones as the wreath-bearing winged charioteer atop Wellington Arch, as Paddy put it, just a minute from her window-sill in the market 'as the pigeon flies'. Immortals both, for another 90 years at least. (I'd kill to read Beatrice's memoirs and P.L.F.'s part in them.)

LIONEL SHRIVER

Tax the poor

A sanctimonious liberal like any other respectable 16-year-old, I made a seminal lurch to the right the first time I opened a pay slip. I was manning the register weekends for the Ice Capades Chalet in Atlanta and made about $40 a week. Or so I imagined. Then where the hell was it? The significantly lighter payment was my rude introduction to taxation at source.

Indignation at being fleeced at a minimal income persisted into my adulthood. I lived on a wing and a prayer for decades, and having to pitch anything whatsoever in the communal pot was consternating. I fancied that I asked for nothing from government; in trade, they should ask for nothing from me. I wasn't yet a grown-up.

By that definition, a large portion of Britons are still not grown up, either. Indeed, the arrangement that suits about half the public is to ask for a great deal from government and put in little in return – for 50 per cent of British taxpayers contribute only 10 per cent of income tax revenue, far less than the roughly £20,000 that on average each adult costs the Exchequer.

Labour would still have us believe that the solution to the UK's chronic deficit is to hammer 'the rich'. On the street (meaning in the comment sections), loads of *Guardian* readers still cling stubbornly to the conviction that all their wealthy compatriots deploy devious, shady loopholes to pay practically nothing.

Hardly, but no endless repetition of the figures can part these people from their precious resentment. Mere facts have never dented the left-wing fantasy that the country's accounts would be quids in if only the super-rich paid their '(un)fair share'. By contrast, many *Spectator* readers could probably recite these numbers by heart: the top 10 per cent of UK earners pay nearly 60 per cent of income tax; the top 1 per cent pay over a quarter, or roughly a third if we include capital gains (as we should); the top 0.01 per cent account for about 2.3 per cent of total income, yet still contribute a disproportionate 5 per cent of all income taxes. Typically, the new PM has mumbled the usual promises about cutting taxes of the less well off, but as Helena Kelly convincingly demonstrated in an essay in the *Times* at the weekend, in Britain it is the wealthy who are overtaxed.

That proposition so defies decades of political rhetoric that it wounds the nation's very soul. In May, I suggested to a Hay Festival audience that the UK would only balance its books by getting more taxes from the lower and middle classes. No one clapped.

That was an affluent crowd, and a slightly higher basic rate would serve their interest. Bottom-bracket British taxpayers are undertaxed compared with the rest of Europe, and since 1980 lower earners' contributions have been going proportionately down. Culturally, however, Britons who have improbably thrived financially have been trained to keep their traps shut. The 'privileged' never, ever complain in public about a government

Britain operates an essentially patrician tax system, dependent on a small, already milked-dry minority

robbing them blind, and for services they underuse. In Wales, if the talent rails against 'inequality', *that's* when you applaud.

Independent economists continually warn politicians that changes in tax policy change what people do. The 'rich' do not sit there inertly while you pick their pockets in plain view; even pea-brained pigeons get out of the way when you're about to run them over. Accordingly, tax expert Dan Neidle has just estimated that Scotland's raising of the top tax rate to 48 per cent has *lost* its national coffers £22 million in a single year.

Yet what exasperates me is officialdom's obliviousness to how confiscatory tax systems make their victims feel. On the popular level, too, we see a staunch refusal to exercise an emotional imagination. Very well if Gary Lineker wants to *volunteer* additional donations. But taxation is coerced; Andy

'Can you create some wealth so I can tax it?'

Burnham's cosy rhetoric aside, the government doesn't 'ask'. So after a stonking bill from HMRC, few and far between are those citizens who light up with the warm glow of altruism – grateful that their personal prosperity has facilitated the opportunity to 'give back' and better the livelihoods of their fellow man.

Sorry – rich folks are people, too. Especially when taxation crosses that psychically incendiary 50 per cent mark, normal human beings get peeved. Affluent Britons may experience the resentment that dare not speak its name, but swallowed resentment grows only more dyspeptic. That 10 per cent of top earners shelling out six times their proportion of the tax-paying public? They feel like idiots. On top of paying VAT, stamp duty, fuel and alcohol duty, inheritance tax and the highest air passenger duty in the world, they feel taken advantage of, and no one enjoys being a mug. Britons who fall into the infamous 'tax trap' of income between £100,000 and £125,000 and suddenly pay 62 per cent – an outrage persisting for years that authorities obstinately refuse to fix – might as well have stepped in a steaming pile of poo. They feel stupid. They feel soiled. They feel humiliated.

Avoiding extortionate taxation often involves earning less. But a primary driver of deliberately constraining one's own income is emotional. On the receiving end, pip-squeaking policies trigger the up-yours reflex. *No, I will not work hard all day for strangers, and you can't make me. I will decline any raise that puts me over that £100,000 threshold* (and many British wage earners are doing just that). Or, *Stuff your self-assessment, I'm retiring early. Better skint than a fool and a patsy. If benefits claimants can scroll YouTube all day, I can do bugger all too.*

Britain now operates an essentially patrician tax system, precariously dependent on a small, already milked-dry minority who can leave or down tools. Their thanks? Being widely despised and their compatriots convinced they pay nothing. OK, Whitehall is bleeding red ink. Ideally, then, rather than further squeeze the sort of hard-pressed lower earner that I was well into my late forties, take an unsparing scythe to spending. But what are the chances of that?

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Live and let die

Death positivity is all the rage

TALI FRASER

It was the day after *The Spectator*'s summer party and I was on my way to something called a death café. After an unknown quantity of Pol Roger the night before, I was already contemplating my own mortality. This death café was being held in a Gail's in Horsham (after closing time, mercifully for its customers). The coffee tables were shoved awkwardly together in the middle of the shop floor. Eight of us, all women, sat: a healthcare worker, a retiree, a lawyer, two death doulas (we'll get to them later) and me, at 26, three decades younger than anyone else present.

We were there because 'death positivity' is having a moment. There are death cafés, death doulas and funeral celebrants who'll narrate your cremation like a wedding DJ. Advocates for death positivity say that we have become squeamish about the idea of dying and that the only way back to a 'good death' is to talk about it more.

Death doulas – sometimes billed as 'soul midwives' – are the influencers in this world. They claim to offer emotional, practical and spiritual support in someone's final months, sitting with the dying the way a birth doula sits with a woman in labour. Caroline Lucas, the former Green party leader, has trained as one. Davina McCall says she will get around to it when she retires. Nicole Kidman is in training following the death of her mother. One doula organisation credits the 'Kidman effect' for increased interest.

It is an entirely unregulated trade. Anyone can call themselves a death doula. The courses on offer, in person or online, require no clinical training or bedside practice. One doula tells me new training providers keep popping up: 'It is a bit of a race to the bottom, with some saying they can train people in a day.' Others require 18 months. Some doulas charge upwards of £50 an hour; others offer their services for free – perhaps that is stranger.

Stranger still are the biographies on doula directories that read like dating app profiles. One doula is 'particularly interested in working with people from BDSM communities'. Perhaps their kink is death. Do they put a ball gag in at the final breath, or offer a latex death mask? There is also a Trans Death Café and a Queer Death Network (no, not some Saudi Arabian punishment initiative). Another death doula is 'particularly interested' in 'people who practise non-monogamy' and 'sex workers'. If what they do is 'invaluable care work', as their profile reads, should that not apply to everyone – not just those in a throuple? For an industry that talks so much about the 'privilege' of being present at the end of a life, a great deal of energy goes on doulas' personal preferences.

I mention this trend for preferred clients to Dr Emma Clare, chief executive of End of Life Doula UK, a membership association with roughly 450 members (though I'm told the preferred term is 'people we support'). When she first started 'doulaing', she says, sex workers approached her to organise 'end of life wishes' acknowledging 'the two lives they were leading – one being quite invisible to their biological family'.

A man in his twenties said he was so paralysed by 'death anxiety' it stopped him doing anything with his life

'When people are dying, it's really important for them to connect with their authentic selves and have a death that honours the life that they've lived,' she says. A group of 'kink positive doulas' began in Australia and is growing here: 'In the same way that we're opening conversations about death, then the next step is to be like, "Oh, well, let's just open conversations about everything."'

About 30 people contact her organisation every month. 'Most of the time it is an adult child of the person dying because they're caring for the person, feeling completely burnt out and exhausted,' she says. The role of sitting with the dying, once quietly undertaken by family, friends, community and religion, has been co-opted by strangers advertising their wares.

Death cafés have their own micro-cultures. Scrolling the listings, you can choose your flavour: Chelmsford insists theirs is 'fun (it really is!)'. Bedford's flyer features a skeleton giving a thumbs-up. Cambridge, hosted by the Quakers, promises merely 'gentle conversations about death'.

'Would you care to tip?'

At the one in Gail's, the conversation was mostly about practicalities: what to do with the body once the talking is over. You can, apparently, transport a dead relative yourself, so long as they're not visible to the public – in the back of a car under a tarpaulin or, as one attendee told me with glee, in a bike trailer. You can bury someone in the back garden as long as you have planning permission, so the home's future owner doesn't unearth a skeleton while digging an extension.

I went to another death café in central London. Sixteen of us, each wearing a name sticker, sat in a circle of chairs, as in an AA meeting. A microphone was passed around so we could explain what had brought us there. One woman, in her seventies at a guess, had simply been there as the café was setting up and asked me what was going on. 'A death café,' I told her. She looked faintly alarmed. 'Don't worry,' I said, 'I don't think they try to bump you off.' She stayed for the whole two hours.

It was a much heavier affair than Gail's. Some people had lost a parent during Covid, without the chance to say goodbye, and were still working through their grief. Others wanted to discuss the anthropology of death, until the host reminded everyone that this wasn't a philosophy seminar. One man in his twenties said he was so paralysed by 'death anxiety' that it stopped him doing anything with his life. The microphone moved on without a beat.

I wanted more than anything to tell that young man to snap out of it – that he was in his twenties, not on his deathbed, and that someone who loved him should give him a proper shake rather than leave him to an anonymous, anxiety-amplifying death circle. But nobody criticises at a death café.

The death positivity crowd would say this all offers the more humane alternative. But a movement that exists in uncritical positivity – that will not tell the twentysomething in the death circle that his anxiety is disordered, that will not ask why a stranger is charging £50 an hour to hold your hand at the end – has a funny way of showing it.

Labour's Gaza problem

Burnham must walk a tightrope when it comes to Israel

PAUL WOOD

Prime Ministers usually wait until they have been in office a little while before issuing apologies. Andy Burnham made one before he even got to Downing Street – about Gaza. But whatever he's planning, it won't be enough to solve Labour's Gaza problem.

After his by-election campaign, Burnham called Gaza 'a scar on our collective conscience' and posted a video on X saying Labour's initial response to Israeli's actions there had caused 'huge' hurt. 'We got it wrong and I am sorry for that.' The apology did demonstrate the sure political touch that has propelled him to No. 10. It was in stark contrast to flat-footed remarks by Keir Starmer before *he* took office – retracted a week later – in which he said Israel had the right to cut off food and power to Gaza.

So what will Burnham do now to throw some red meat to former (or current) Labour supporters who are furious about Gaza? As a first step, there will probably be a ban on imports from settlements in the West Bank, where the government of Benjamin Netanyahu has been busy trying to redraw the map and expand Israel's borders. Burnham has hinted at this and it was already being considered by his predecessor.

Doing nothing is not an option. There are 21 constituencies where Muslims make up more than 30 per cent of the population and they are deserting Labour. In the 2024 general election, Labour's share of the vote across those constituencies collapsed from 65 to 36 per cent, a loss of more than 300,000 votes. Five pro-Gaza independents were elected.

That's only the start of Labour's Gaza troubles – and not because of the Muslim vote. Number crunching published by the *Political Quarterly* finds the Greens second to Labour in 39 constituencies. The report suggests that a five-point Labour-to-Green swing would flip 43 Labour seats to the Conservatives. In a tight election, that's the difference between forming the next government, or not.

Some big names are at risk. Last time around, the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, saw her share of the vote in her Birmingham Ladywood constituency fall 37 points, giving her a majority of 3,421 votes. (If that still seems like a lot, Labour votes in Birmingham Ladywood used to be weighed rather than counted, as was once said about the Welsh Valleys.) Meanwhile Wes Streeting held Ilford North by 528 votes, a majority of just 1.1 per cent. His opponent was Leanne Mohamad, an independent running on Gaza.

The Defence Secretary's recent criticism of Israel is, among other things, a survival strategy. Last week, Streeting said that Israel had 'fallen short' of British military standards. To be fair, these are also Streeting's convictions. In text messages to Peter Mandelson – published in February – he says Israel is guilty of 'rogue state behaviour' and 'talking the language' of ethnic cleansing. 'Israel is committing war crimes before our eyes… let them pay the price as pariahs with sanctions applied to the state.'

But there is little immediate chance of an arms embargo to satisfy the base. Streeting's public remarks were delivered at the

In 21 constituencies Muslims make up more than 30 per cent of the population and are deserting Labour

Farnborough air show, where several Israeli arms manufacturers had exhibits. Israeli software powers some of our weapons systems, for instance.

Streeting refused to say whether we should stop buying from Israeli defence companies: 'Those are not my decisions alone.' In theory, if not in practice, the Defence Secretary can decide not to buy a country's weapons on national security grounds, though not humanitarian grounds. Then there's the choice of what we sell to Israel. A Defence Secretary who believes Israel has committed war crimes could advise the rest of government not to issue any more export licences.

The most militarily significant things Britain supplies are parts for the F-35. Direct exports to Israel were stopped; what continues is Britain's contribution to the global pool of spares from which Israel draws. British firms are said to build roughly 15 per cent of every F-35 by value, including the rear fuselage and the ejector seat. The defence secretary who advised that this should continue was John Healey, who said that to do otherwise would 'undermine US confidence in the UK'.

'I'm visiting my grandchildren – they don't get out much.'

Healey is now at the centre of government as Chancellor. If this is still his view, he may find an ally in the new Downing Street chief of staff, James Purnell, a former chair of Labour Friends of Israel. The Prime Minister himself is reportedly a member of Labour Friends of Israel and is also extremely wary of anything that would cause a breach with the United States. Burnham is continuing to allow Donald Trump to use British bases for bombing Iran.

Burnham – and now the government he leads – have been careful not to say Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. That was up to the international courts, he said before reaching Downing Street. It will be years before the International Court of Justice issues its final ruling on Gaza.

In the meantime, if Burnham feels the need to make a bigger gesture than banning imports from the West Bank, he may be surprised at how little difference that makes. The important relationship for Israel is with Washington. As one observer with good lines to the Israeli government told me: 'The UK doesn't register.' This is true at the best of times, never mind in the run up to a bitterly contested Israeli election in October.

It would help Burnham if Labour's sister party in Israel, the Democrats, end up in government. They are led by a former general, Yair Golan. Someone close to him told me that Britain could play 'an important and in some cases unique role' in helping Israel to make peace with the Palestinians.

But that is only one scenario and there is – always – the law of unintended consequences. Every international criticism of Israel helps far-right figures like Itamar Ben-Gvir. New sanctions on Israel by Britain would be a gift to him and others like him in the election campaign.

It would be embarrassing for the Prime Minister if taking the moral high ground gives extremists the balance of power in the next Israeli government. Burnham may find that Middle East politics are just as treacherous as those in the Labour party.

MADELINE GRANT

It's the ideology, stupid

What do Nigel Farage, gender-critical feminism, masculinity, generalised homophobia and GB News have in common? All have been blamed in the past week or so for the pair of terror attacks in Berlin and Paris which left one dead and dozens wounded. Labour MPs (including the cabinet minister Chris Bryant), left-wing commentators and journalists have rushed to point the finger at a variety of bizarre targets.

It must be hard being an Islamist. Imagine, you've gone to a great deal of planning and effort to commit an atrocity and make clear to the world that your motivations for doing so are your murderous religio-political creed. Then, just as the *malaikah* are introducing you to the 72 virgins, you notice that Chris Bryant has posted on social media, attributing your actions to all-purpose, gender non-specific 'hatred'. You are, then, according to Bryant and co, the same as a Christian who holds to the Church's historic view of marriage. You are the same as someone who doesn't believe a woman can have a penis. You are the same as a person who mocked Stella Creasy online for not knowing the difference between a parrot and a parakeet. Were Bryant not one of the most obnoxiously pompous people in Westminster, you would almost respect him for this level of trolling.

Politicians' responses to Islamist terror attacks will probably make a fascinating PhD topic in future years. There is a set narrative that follows any of these incidents: the first priority is to decry any sense that the literal murder of innocent civilians could be used to divide communities. Now I don't know about you, but I would suggest that the truly divisive act is that of stabbing a random stranger in a public place with the intent of striking fear into the West. Apparently not.

The tactic of blaming generic 'hate', rather than a specific ideology, is followed by an immediate condemnation of anyone who does otherwise. We are now in the deranged world where to take a murderer at his word is considered a worse act of 'stirring up hatred' – or at least one more worthy of comment – than the committing of the murder in the first place. So it has proved this time. The organisers of Berlin Pride said the attack must not be used 'for political ends'. 'People are trying to divide our society and set some people against others,' they said in a statement. At a vigil, a singer even went so far as to say she hoped the attacker was 'white' and 'Christian'. Soon afterwards, the suspect was identified as a radical Islamist of Lebanese extraction named Abdul Ballout. Germany, which has, shall we say, a track record when it comes to the wholesale embrace of dangerous ideologies, is not even an outlier. The Labour MP Kate Osborne linked the Berlin Pride attack to the rise of Reform UK and GB News. Both, she said, were part of an 'escalation of hate' across Europe, which was a 'catalyst for real-world physical violence'. In Paris, officials warned against

In this deranged view, to take a murderer at his word is considered a worse act of 'stirring up hatred'

'jumping to conclusions' following a stabbing spree in which the suspect was heard by witnesses to shout: 'Allah has commanded me to do this.' Ah.

There are evident double-standards here: the same people have no trouble identifying the far-right immediately should they commit any acts of violence. Yet across Europe, progressives in positions of power and influence go through an identical rigmarole every time an Islamist attack occurs. Only one, regime-approved, lesson is ever allowed to be taken from such tragedies. Everything else is 'division'.

The progressives who excuse or equivocate over attacks on the most vulnerable – women, children, gays, Jews – are especially perverse given that these are the same

people who talk so endlessly about justice and equality. At its most noble, the left seeks to protect and speak up for the innocent, the powerless, the forgotten. However, the left performs gymnastic-style apologetics for Islamism. It denies what it is and what it routinely tells us that it seeks to be – that is, a threat to the basic freedoms and values that make up the dignity of the West. Critically, it refuses to admit that Islamism is a threat unlike any other, lest the light of reality break into the myth of diversity. All this gives succour to violent men and imperils the innocent. It makes those at the edge of a fraying society vulnerable. Is it any wonder that gays in Germany are now more likely to vote for the AfD than any other party? Is it any wonder that some of the most important actions against the rape gangs in Britain have been led by women?

Deep down, I suspect progressives know that they are imperilling their traditional voting coalitions. Their responses often reflect this. There is a particularly invidious form of weasel words which play minority rights against each other (something, ironically, which those in power routinely accuse the right of doing). Sadiq Khan reacted to the Berlin attack by saying that it showed 'why Pride matters'. Actually, it shows why we need stronger immigration controls and a more intense and targeted deradicalisation strategy for young Muslim males.

Khan knows that, most gay people know that, anyone with half a brain knows that. So the reasons for putting out such a statement are necessarily political rather than providing a practical solution. Khan's inference is obviously that all gay people should get behind the state-approved line that what's needed is more public displays of diversity, not any action against the specific ideology which commits these crimes again and again.

It will keep happening, and progressive leaders will keep minimising the threat by labelling it 'hate'. But hate isn't generic. Hate is horribly targeted. These attacks don't happen because of an impossible-to-define misanthropy, they happen because their perpetrators believe we should live in a caliphate and it is their duty to bring this about using violence. It's important to keep pointing that out, even if our leaders refuse to do so.

All at sea

The Royal Navy has been disastrously neglected

ANDREW LAMBERT

It's all very well for Andy Burnham and John Healey to say they want to fund defence, but are they aware of just what a perilous situation the Royal Navy is in? Policy failure by successive governments, more focused on election appeal than security, means the state has lost sight of the basics. Ensuring the free movement of global shipping has been a priority for centuries because Britain cannot produce enough food, fuel or raw materials for itself. Along with the nuclear deterrence, shipping routes form the existential core of our national security. These routes – vital in world wars against Napoleon, the Kaiser and Hitler – depended on a powerful, globally deployed navy. The current force is not up to the task.

The place of the ocean in national life and culture has also declined. Seafaring roles and shipbuilding have been outsourced. Essential ships are registered by nations without warships, or even a coast. In the past, the connection between a powerful navy, the interests of the City of London and the economic health of the nation was acknowledged by governments of all parties, and managed by the Admiralty, a great department of state located not 100 yards from Nelson's Column. The Admiralty built, maintained, crewed and directed the navy in war and peace, stood up to the Treasury and co-ordinated with the War Office on strategy. It worked with Lloyd's of London to manage wartime convoy systems from the 18th century to 1945, securing ocean trade and destroying hostile economies.

After 1945, Britain sacrificed the navy's wider roles and focused instead on the Cold War defence of West Germany. We relied on America's immense forces to plug the gaps. In 1964, politicians desperate for more defence cuts abolished the Admiralty, merging the three service ministries into an amorphous Ministry of Defence that lacked any sense of commercial links, cultural prominence and national dependence on the sea. The new arrangement expanded the dominance of the Treasury, which cut major programmes, notably new aircraft carriers, within months of the change. Not only did the MoD ignore the centuries-old priority of maritime security, but it sacrificed critical non-military roles, including acting as the central clearing house for maritime messaging that ensured Britain understood why the sea was central to national security, identity and prosperity. After 1964, British strategy was no longer shaped by the realities of geography and oceanic dependence. Instead it focused on Nato, dismissing other commitments as being 'Out of [the Nato] Area'. These included the Falkland Islands.

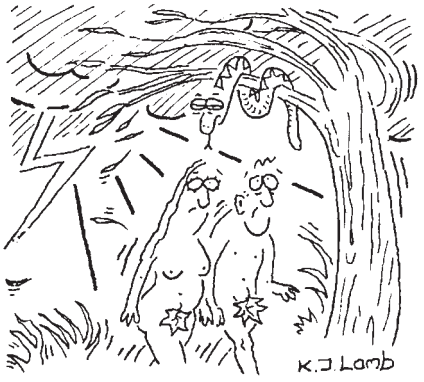
The Falklands War in 1982 demonstrated the limits of Nato support, most of all American – a constant concern as long as Britain is weak. The navy rapidly assembled and dispatched a taskforce, recovered the islands and upheld international order. The success reflected the fact that the navy still owned and ran the maintenance facilities – but only just. They were about to be privatised. Thankfully,

After 1964, British strategy was no longer shaped by the realities of geography and oceanic dependence

because of the swift and effective response to Argentine aggression, plans to cut the navy were reduced, ensuring a strong national response to the tanker war of 1987-88.

Despite the post-1964 decline, when the Cold War ended the navy was still in just about reasonable order. The contrast with today is painful. We need to know who decided to reduce national defences to their current state. Who halved the Type 45 Destroyer build? Who failed to order new frigates to meet the end of life expectancy of the Type 23 class? There have been several times in recent years when the navy has not had a single attack submarine at sea – why were new ones not ordered in time to avoid the fiasco?

Having forgotten why and how this country took such a large role in world history, politicians treat defence as a question of percentages. They do not appear to understand that solutions that work for most Nato partners will not necessarily meet British needs. In this regard, the Nato defence spending goal of 3 per cent of GDP is an unhelpful incentive. It encourages a standardised assembly of capabilities, when the intelligent thing to do is to create defence systems that deliver national security both within the alliance and outside it. Nato would not act if the Falklands were attacked tomorrow. Furthermore, the 3 per cent target fails to recognise specific priorities. For instance, since Germany is building a serious tank force, Britain can focus on the sea, instead of rehashing veteran vehicles.



'You are banned for contravening our safeguarding policy.'

If Britain were to restore the navy, that would require a consistent long-term building plan to keep the fleet at full strength. It would mean no more Treasury-led funding gaps and quick fixes that leave the navy with massive repair bills for old assets, a shortage of new ships and submarines and a maintenance crisis that private industry appears unable to address. Returning maintenance to nationally owned facilities would be an obvious answer. Private industry has long had a major role in defence, but the Armed Forces and national security are the government's responsibility and should not be privatised for profit.

Earlier this year, there was a small example of what the navy can still achieve. On 14 June, British forces seized the Cameroon-flagged 'shadow' tanker *Smyrtos*, which had sailed from the Baltic. The operation was legal, swift and effective. Russia's war economy relies on the illegal movement of oil, gas, fertiliser and grain to fund the Ukraine war. Does our navy have the resources to do something about this at the scale required?

The new government has an opportunity to sort this out before it gets any worse. Wes Streeting, the Defence Secretary, has already said he will resign if not enough is spent on defence. If the government can restore the deterrent fleet, securing more new frigates and much else, then Britain can return to the classic maritime strategic model. Without a fleet upgrade, our interests will be ignored by friends and foes alike.

Andrew Lambert is Laughton Professor of Naval History in the department of war studies at King's College.

Rights and wrongs

Sir: As one of those centre-left weirdos who reads your magazine to see what the other side is thinking, I was surprised by your assertions regarding Britain's wrong economic turn ('Labour's inheritance', 25 July). There is a reason why Britain's economy has grown so slowly since 2008 and it is directly related to the financial crisis you mention in the same paragraph – the bailout for which was laid on the taxpayer, resulting in the austerity agenda, both of which significantly dragged on GDP. There was a cross-party faith that the financial system would regulate itself. The same thinking applied to Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy policy on council houses: buy your house and let the market sort the rest. We know this has not happened with sufficient volume or affordability.

If people are turning to Burnhamism, it's because the right has failed to put enough guardrails on the opportunities it affords.
Mark Peachey
St Helens, Merseyside

How to spend it

Sir: Your leading article of 25 July mentioned Roger Douglas, who was finance minister of the New Zealand Labour party. He certainly understood finance and published his thoughts in a book titled *Towards Prosperity*. Key to the NZ approach was its annual yearbook. It looked at its sources of income and what resources were needed to earn it, which led on to national income, immigration policy, taxation and expenditure. This seemed perfectly logical to me and makes an interesting comparison to our own approach, which seems to miss a few steps before it gets to the spend stage.
Clive Marsh
East Sussex

Smoke screen

Sir: James Dixon's excellent piece ('Pipe dreams', 25 July) reminded me of a lecture given by an experienced detective in the 1980s. He informed us junior CIDs that 'never in the course of solving thousands of serious offences did I ever encounter a criminal who smoked a pipe'.
Graham Cox
Bexhill

In the pipeline

Sir: I enjoyed James Dixon's defence of the pipe, which provided a convincing argument for smoking slowly in solitude. However it would be remiss of me as secretary for the Pipe Club of Norfolk not to point out that smoking in company can be just as rewarding. Convivial conversation, sharing tobaccos and, occasionally, comparing pipes. In fact, what better form of 'doing nothing' could there be than a slow smoking competition? Visitors or prospective members would be made most welcome.
Joe Morris
Norwich, Norfolk

A crafty puff

Sir: I bought my first pipe from Woolworths while still at school in 1969, and didn't give up tobacco until smoking in pubs was banned in 2007. James Dixon brought back memories of smoke-filled bars where a pipeful of Condor complemented both beer and conversation. Within one year of the ban an estimated 1,500 pubs closed. My career as a prep-school master also altered as common rooms became sanitised, and the opportunity for a crafty puff or two between lessons was outlawed. We cricket masters commonly smoked our pipes while umpiring matches, where few could resist the temptation to blast out a cloud of smoke just as the opposition fast bowler reached the pinnacle of his delivery stride.
John Walker
Abingdon, Oxon

Kemi's strategy

Sir: Matthew Parris ('Kemi needs her centrists', 25 July) laments Kemi Badenoch's sharpness toward the softer, nougaty centre of the Conservative party, who balk at her stances on the ECHR and net zero. He is right that she will eventually need a broad church, but underplays the longer-term, two-phase strategy needed to build a credible opposition. Kemi and her party's immediate priority is existential: fending off the Nigel-inclined flank by offering something familiar that millions on the right can buy into, without having to make the leap to Reform.

The second act – loosening up to welcome a wider array of Cameroon Conservative views – can begin only once she has won back those who felt the Tories had grown too 'meh' to be trusted.
Louis de Verilles
Hertfordshire

Man up

Sir: Joan Alexander ('Advance notice') and Melissa Kite ('Save the date') nicely portray the challenges of modern-day relationships (25 July). From my recent experience at university, young men are terrified about being perceived as creepy. They will forgo the opportunity to ask a woman out, fearing not only rejection, but reputational damage. It explains why men are hiding behind their mobile phones. According to research, 45 per cent of men between the ages of 18 and 25 have never made a romantic approach to a woman in their entire life. The paradox is that around 85 per cent of women want men to make the first move. Given that our birth rate is an ominous 1.39 children per woman, we should be sending men a more positive message, signalling the importance of approaching women confidently and respectfully. A simple cultural change like this could be enormously beneficial for society in the long term.
Henry Bateson
Whittingham, Northumberland

Shorts shrift

Sir: I am 89 and I feel Andrew Nash is a little pessimistic in advocating against the wearing of shorts by elderly men (Letters, 25 July). Spindly shanks can be much improved sartorially by the wearing of knee-length white stockings resembling the white football socks worn by a number of the football World Cup teams, and will hence become iconic.
Robin Aird
Wolverton Common, Hampshire

Cabinet women

Sir: Charles Moore asks if he is 'right to be shocked that the Burnham cabinet contains 33.333 per cent fewer gay men than the Starmer one?' (Notes, 25 July). I'd say no: the cabinet's inclusion of Angela Eagle, a gay woman, surely compensates for this? Further, more noteworthy to me is that for the very first time in British political history, women comprise half the cabinet, thus at last achieving gender parity in the highest offices of state.
Peter Saunders
Salisbury, Wiltshire

Boring on

Sir: I cannot agree with Steve Morris (Notes on…, 25 July) about seeking out and listening to party bores. What is interesting about the fact that the junction of the A29 and the A272 gets blocked? Or the junction of the A24 and the A27? You see, I'm doing it myself now. Boringness is contagious. I can go on about this at some length.
Antony Bird
Petworth

We have a consignment of Gentleman's Relish, a pot of which will be sent to the writer of the best letter each week. This week's winner is Henry Bateson.

Proud to pay, Gary? Here's how to be a truly patriotic millionaire

Patriotic Millionaires UK, led by the former City trader Gary Stevenson and endorsed by Gary Lineker, has '100-plus' members but claims to speak for 'the majority of UK millionaires' – doubtful, given that 150,000 homeowners in the south-east of England notionally fall into the seven-digit category. Under the slogan 'Tax us, we're proud to pay and here to stay', the two Garys have offered Andy Burnham a ten-point plan to raise 'over £50 billion in a single year'. Top of the list, at £24 billion, is a 2 per cent tax on assets over £10 million that has been dismissed by tax experts as one of the fastest ways to drive wealth out of the country, confirmed by news that Scotland's 48p top rate of income tax (compared with 45p in England), enacted in 2024, resulted in a drop in tax collected.

Among their other ideas, 'tax private jets more' and 'close the carried interest loophole so private equity bosses pay their fair share' might well win public approval. But overall, the exercise does a disservice to already tax-burdened fellow citizens by encouraging Burnham and Chancellor John Healey to believe higher taxes generally and wealth taxes in particular, with celebrity endorsements, can fund profligate public spending.

So let me offer the self-styled patriots my own multi-point plan to direct their fortunes in ways that might really help balance the Treasury books while addressing inequalities, about which they claim to care. First, proudly or otherwise, pay all the taxes you owe. Don't pay lawyers and accountants to devise fancy offshore avoidance schemes; donate what you might have spent that way to a charity which helps young people gain skills, find work and start businesses. If you're seriously rich, set up your own foundation and invite charities of all kinds to apply for grants. Charities almost always spend money more effectively than the state.

Next, allocate part of your pile to venture capital. Back a dozen start-ups in anything from AI to English wines, in the expectation that at least one of them will take off and pay back what you lose on the others. You might also buy and re-open your closed-down local pub; and feed your vanity by commissioning an impecunious artist to paint your portrait. You boast you're 'the super rich' who 'can afford it': so be an active economic citizen, a catalyst for enterprise and a creative philanthropist. But do so as quietly as you can, without hectoring the rest of us.

Early exit for Bailey?

Excited about the race to be the next boss of the European Central Bank? Neither am I, frankly, unless it hots up because the incumbent, Christine Lagarde, resigns early to become a centre-right candidate for president of France (where she used to be finance minister) after Emmanuel Macron. She has denied that ambition, but watch this space.

Favourite to succeed her at the ECB next year is a Spaniard, Pablo Hernández de Cos from the Bank for International Settlements, ahead of Dutch and German runners. But EU leaders are well capable of dirty tricks in the stables, as happened when the French undermined the Dutch first ECB chief, Wim Duisenberg, in order to replace him with their own Jean-Claude Trichet – though the handover had to be delayed while the latter was cleared of fraud charges.

Meanwhile, central bank watchers must wait a while longer for a competition to succeed Andrew Bailey, who is all but invisible these days as governor of the Bank of England but due to stay in post until March 2028. Among his deputy governors, only Sir Dave Ramsden from the Treasury has any profile outside Threadneedle Street. What price an early Bailey retirement to make way for the Stockport-born ex-Goldman Sachs guru and Burnham adviser Lord (Jim) O'Neill?

Fading exchange

DCC Energy is the fifth FTSE 100 company this year to succumb to a bargain-hunting foreign buyer, following Schroders in fund management, Beazley in insurance, Intertek in inspection services and Segro, the former Slough Estates property group. There have also been half-a-dozen FTSE 250 leavers so far, led by easyJet and Tate & Lyle. Combined with a bare trickle of new listings, the current rate of shrinkage means there could be no London Stock Exchange at all in a generation's time. I won't be around to review the restaurant that takes over the LSE's Paternoster Square premises, but the problem is far more urgent than that. The new City minister, Lucy Rigby, is a competition lawyer who trained at one of London's still world-class firms, Slaughter and May. What's her advice on how to make the Square Mile competitive again?

Club class

My Beefeater reward club membership being long out of date (like the steakhouse format itself, created in 1974 to compete against Berni Inns of distant memory), I was late to the news that Whitbread, the FTSE 100 parent company, is about to close all 106 remaining Beefeater outlets, converting some to bedrooms for its Premier Inn chain and shedding 3,800 jobs. Once a great name in brewing, Whitbread will henceforth be a 'pure-play, higher-margin hotel business' while its eaterie brands (Brewers Fayre is also doomed) meet a fate driven by changing tastes and hastened by Labour's NIC raid, minimum wage hikes and the failure to tackle food and energy inflation.

As a nod to that damage, the new Prime Minister's token 20 per cent cut in business rates for supposedly 'working-class' pubs and social clubs but not middle-class restaurants met a cynical response from the trade. 'Labour's just taken ten grand off us, now Burnham says be grateful for 20 quid back,' one Yorkshire publican put it to me. And what defines a social club for this purpose? If the Stubshaw Cross community club in Makerfield qualifies, why not White's and Boodle's in St James's, where business rates are many times higher? They're just as social – and if the Burnham bonus comes through, they'll toast him in vintage claret.

BOOKS & ARTS

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'Watermelon, pumpkin and cucumber,' 1950s, by Enid Marx
Melanie McDonagh – p44

Michael Taube enjoys a high seas adventure unlike any other
James Ball warns that the wellness industry is putting us at risk
Mark Piesing explains how the West has become its own worst enemy
Graeme Thomson listens to Charli XCX phoning it in
Alex Diggins discovers that Unesco's remit is vast – from safeguarding the rights of Turkmen dog breeders to overseeing the tsunami early-warning system
Richard Bratby witnesses the concert of the year
James Delingpole suspects a lot of TV is AI-generated

BOOKS

An immense conundrum

Nicholas Shakespeare discovers how little he really knew his friend Mario Vargas Llosa

Mario Vargas Llosa: A Life
by Gerald Martin
Bloomsbury, £35, pp. 800

In October 2010, when Gabriel García Márquez, by then suffering from dementia, was told that his former friend and rival had won the Nobel Prize for Literature, he enquired: 'Who is Mario Vargas Llosa?' This tottering, always compulsive biography of the writer who died last year and which has taken 15 years to write ('I completely miscalculated its complications') is Gerald Martin's valiant answer. 'Is there a life quite like this one anywhere in the western world in the second half of the 20th century?' In Martin's breathless judgment 'this literary adventurer, politician, diplomat and warrior all rolled into one' was a single-minded workhorse whose sheer intensity, quality and variety of life was 'almost literally incredible'.

Listeners to Vargas Llosa's Nobel lecture in 2010 knew his reputation as 'the Julio Iglesias of contemporary fiction', who had defined headlines for 60 years, winning numerous literary prizes for a novel or an essay ('or for mere "famousness"', in one critic's phrase); who had veered politically from left to right – from the plebeian communist student 'Comrade Alberto', championing the Cuban revolution, to the aristocratic 'Marquis de Vargas Llosa', confidant of the disgraced King of Spain, plus reverential supporter of Mrs Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who in 1990 had come within touching distance of being elected Peru's president.

As well, his Stockholm audience was aware that Vargas Llosa's cool, amiable, belligerently frank demeanour camouflaged a turbulent private life. In 1955, he'd scandalised his family by marrying his aunt Julia, when he was 19 and she 29, later commemorating this precocious declaration of independence in his best-loved novel, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. In 1965, he'd repeated the outrage by getting married again – this time to his first cousin Patricia, when she was 19 and he 29. And, most scandalous of all, in 1976, in a cinema in Mexico City, he'd encountered his open-armed 'blood brother' García Márquez, only to fell him to the ground with 'the most famous punch in literary history'. Offering no explanation other than shouting 'That's for what you did to Patricia!', Vargas Llosa fled Mexico, never spoke again to García Márquez and withdrew from circulation his 667-page critical study of his 'official best friend – and unofficial nemesis'.

Martin – pertinently, also García Márquez's biographer – is keen to see this unexplained but universally discussed punch as the key to the 'vast parable' of Vargas Llosa's 'fabulous life', the reason behind the unsuspected right hook potentially unlocking the further mystery of how a great realist novelist transformed into a passionate neoliberal crusader.

He had a habit of sinking his notable teeth – the fangs of a lone wolf – into any hand that fed him

I was a friend of Vargas Llosa for 40 years – made documentaries on him, wrote a novel that sprang from one of our conversations and liked him enormously – but reading Martin's extraordinary portrait I realise how little I knew him. Mario's cousin Freddy Cooper Llosa told me:

> Mario didn't have the depth to deal with his emotions, the maturity. He grew up with no father. His mother was an unsophisticated, nice woman, who'd fallen madly in love with a Pan American radio operator on a flight from Arequipa; and his grandfather taught him to read 19th-century novels by authors who had affairs that Mario later wanted to emulate.

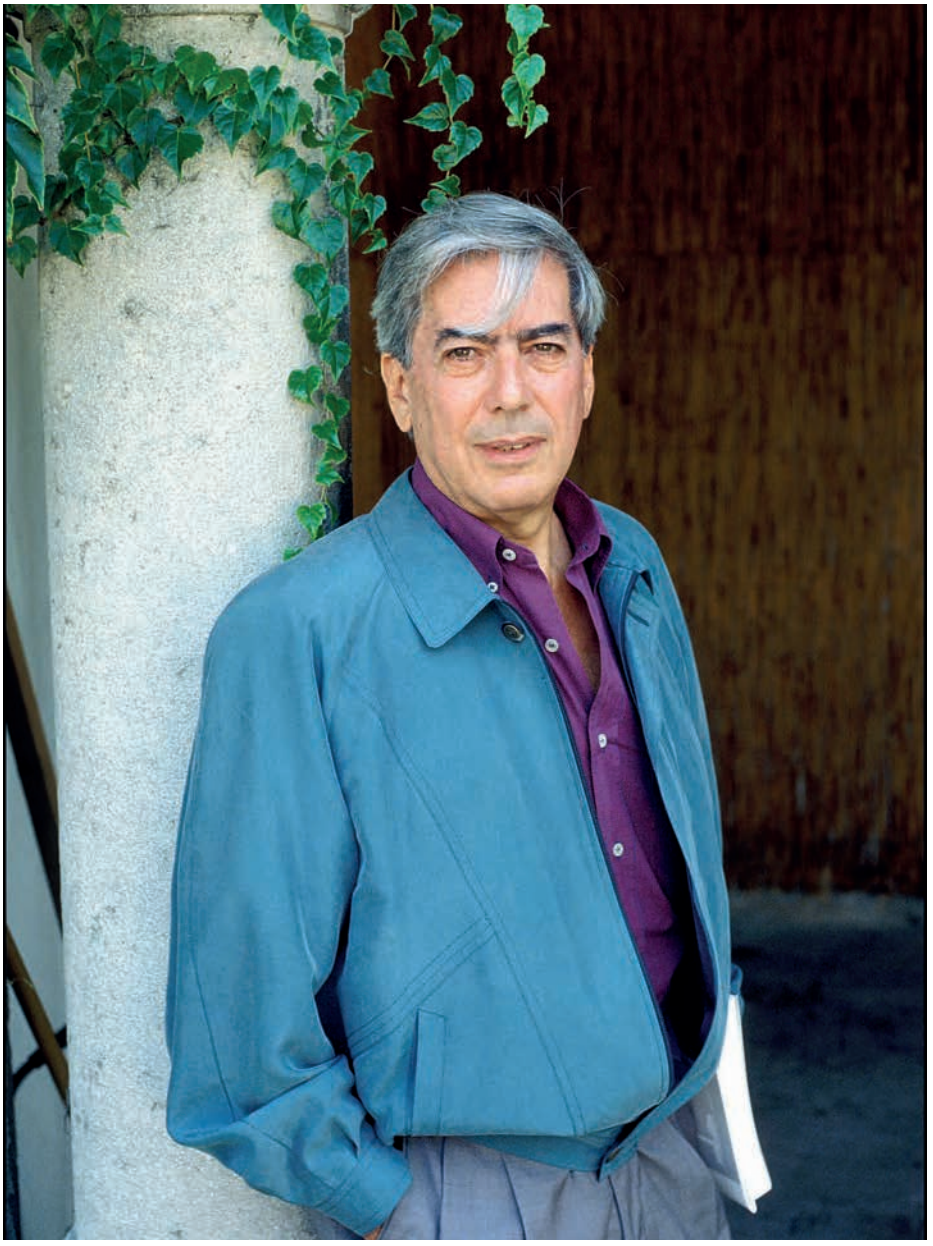
Martin locates 'the first primal scene' in Peru's coastal city of Piura. Mario, who for his initial ten years had shared his mother's bed, every night kissing a photograph of the inexplicably deceased Ernesto Llosa, was suddenly told that his handsome father was alive; furthermore, he intended to re-enter their lives. Mario's usurpation by a paunchy, bald-headed tyrant, who regarded his poetry-loving son as 'a cissy', was to be the tormenting source of his literary success. 'Much of who I am and what I have written I owe to him.'

In Martin's reading, Vargas Llosa dedicated himself to literature precisely to avoid examining his foundational narrative. Betrayed by those he most loved, he never outgrew the ten-year-old 'hope of the tribe' who had been lied to. Both in his life and books, reckons Martin, he was motivated by revenge and resentment; not merely against his violent father ('I hated him'), but also against: Peru (at one moment calling for sanctions against his country); the 'cheap intellectuals' who'd been his left-wing friends; and ultimately anyone who swam too close, including his two wives, his two half-brothers and even his cousin Freddy. 'He cut off anyone who argued with his politics,' said Freddy. 'He never sorted out the immaturity of his upbringing.'

From the late 1950s, Vargas Llosa lived his life away from Peru, in Paris, Barcelona and London, in order to create his prize-winning novels about it. He argued for the 'divine freedom' to write and behave as he wished. Yet in satisfying his transgressive appetite for ever more independence, he tied himself in gaslighting knots. According to Patricia, he was like Oedipus, 'inveterately self-blinded' about himself and his relationships to other people in the real world; insightful and visionary only in his imagination.

'Why, why so many lies, so many deceptions, so much disloyalty?' lamented his first wife Julia, who behaved with exemplary dignity when she discussed Mario with me in La Paz. 'He was such a selfish and ignoble person.' With mounting disillusionment, Martin catalogues his subject's habit

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



Portrait of the 'ignoble' Nobel Prize-winner by Giovanni Giovannetti

of sinking his notable teeth – the fangs of 'a lone wolf' – into any hand that fed him: 'Selflessness would never be his thing… "denial" and "Vargas Llosa" are also words that go together.' Juiciest of countless ironies is Julio Iglesias's chastisement, following Mario's elopement, aged 79, with the crooner's first wife, the 63-year-old socialite Isabel Preysler, shortly after Mario and Patricia celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary: 'Senor Vargas Llosa's behaviour leaves much to be desired.'

'At what moment did Peru get fucked?' was the primordial quote of his 1969 novel *Conversation in the Cathedral*. In Vargas Llosa's case, Martin argues: 'Uchuraccay was surely the moment he "fucked up".' His superficial investigation into the 1983 deaths of eight journalists in the Andean village of Uchuraccay suggested the terrible possibility that 'Vargas Llosa really did not know Peru' – or, indeed, himself – a suspicion which his subsequent presidency campaign, enlivened by his affair with Roxana, the wife of a cousin, served only to deepen. Ten days before the election, Mario had not heard of the Japanese agronomist who would defeat him in a landslide by 57 per cent to 34 per cent. It was a personal disaster.

'If he couldn't have Peru, he would have Spain.' He moved to Madrid, the seat of political power, became the principal protagonist in the quincentenary celebrations for Columbus's discovery of his continent, and turned himself into 'a fictional character from which he could never escape'. His novels took a downward path, 'more limited and low key', with their author ending up as a propagandist for right-wing populists such as Javier Milei and Jai Bolsonaro, promoting the sort of utopian ideology that his fiction had excoriated. 'It is not hard to see this as a tragedy.'

In *Aunt Julia*, a writer of radio soap operas goes mad as his daily scripts for ten different soaps become more and more entangled in a single story. At times when watching Martin scale Vargas Llosa's various peaks, I had the image of an overloaded pack mule negotiating a pass in the Andes and trembling lest he plunge off-piste, like Norman Sherry in his Graham Greene biography. Martin appears endearingly conscious of his unwieldy burden, 'with slightly different styles blurring the full thematic focus'. But puffing hard, he gets there.

Inevitably, it falls to the biographer of 'unquestionably the two leading writers in Latin America' to adjudicate in the prize fight between these heavyweights. While Martin judges Vargas Llosa's life as the more epic, he manifestly considers García Márquez more integrated as a human being and writer, even if Vargas Llosa, that 'immense conundrum', was 'much more politically influential'. Martin's assessment: 'Technically and even historically, he could have been Tolstoy, or even Hugo; spiritually, he could not.'

As for that 'infamous punch', I heard the same story from Carlos Fuentes, kick-starter of the Boom, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Mario's best friend in London. Abandoned once again during another of Mario's humid romances, Patricia fled to Barcelona and dined with García Márquez, who drove her to her hotel, where he advised: 'If you want to get Mario back, you must have an affair – or pretend to have an affair – with someone he's jealous of. And there's only one person he's jealous of. Me.' Once returned to his embrace, Patricia later made the error of telling her errant husband. Never someone to brook competition, Mario suffered a catatonic eruption when he next saw García Márquez in that cinema foyer.

Reflections on the writing life

Emily Rhodes

Unsayable
by Michael Cunningham
Fourth Estate, £16.99, pp. 144

There's a chapter in this mostly illuminating and occasionally irritating book in which the author – the award-winning writer of *The Hours* and other acclaimed novels – explains why he no longer reads reviews of his work. The decision was prompted first by an 'excoriating' hatchet job by Michiko Kakutani, erstwhile lead literary critic of the *New York Times.* 'A worse review is difficult to imagine,' Cunningham notes, claiming that he has 'mostly repressed the memory' of its contents, though he does share his rather macabre plan for revenge: to slip a copy of the book into her coffin so that 'extraterrestrial archaeologists' will assume she wanted to be buried with it. He doesn't find good ones helpful either, ridiculing a 'well-intentioned' yet ignorant reviewer for praising him for what was in fact a 'famous' line from Flaubert that he slipped, unattributed, into a character's inner monologue. So there's no need to worry about Cunningham reading this…

Unsayable is a memoir of a life spent writing, of trying to 'make [the world] more real for ourselves'. 'My earliest memory is a lack of language,' Cunningham begins, conjuring a vivid scene of his three-year-old self trying to reach a piece of Tupperware and not knowing the word for it. He goes on to describe how his early desire to name everything eventually led to his becoming a writer, prompting a beautiful evocation of his craft:

> You could say that writing is a continuation of that effort to render and recognise everything and everyone by naming their qualities, ideally from an illuminating angle – by naming them in ways that are both recognisable and unfamiliar, by combining words unconventionally so that, coming into contact, they emit new sparks of meaning.

He also points out that writers are, almost by definition, doomed to fail:

> We who write them know that any story, even the greatest of them, is an approximation of the unsayable – that which we all know but can't express in language.

Alongside reflections on his writing life, Cunningham shares tales of love and sexuality. There are stories of adventure and of sentimentality, of childhood infatuation, of being a rent boy, of wearing a grass skirt as a bartender and flirting with customers, and of the tenderness he feels after a storm, towelling off the man who became his husband. 'Can you bear it if I compare the writing process to being in love?' he asks, rhetorically. It's down to the individual reader whether they find these occasions of being addressed directly warm and engaging or cloyingly overfamiliar. I veered between the two.

Writers tend to be readers first, and Cunningham is no exception. He renders a high-school conversation with a 'compelling' older girl whose admiration of Virginia Woolf made him read *Mrs Dalloway* to impress her. He credits this as the moment that 'produced a change in me', turning him into a reader, which 'initiated' his becoming a writer. He quotes some Woolf, recalls his admiration for her 'slightly off-kilter yet dead accurate phrases', and compares her to Jimi Hendrix.

It's one of many refreshingly informal pieces of practical criticism. Some of the book's best moments are when Cunningham uses passages from other authors to demonstrate stellar writing. In a chapter on the 'music' of words, he shows the predominance of 'the hiss of "s"' in some Cormac McCarthy, and how Marilynne Robinson's flowing clauses have an effect 'more like a cello than a drum'. He turns his critical eye on his own work, too, which can be instructive, but can also risk seeming a little self-aggrandising. I'm not sure we need a whole chapter about his process of writing the first line of this book, listing the drafts he went through and his notes on them, or if we have to be told, over several paragraphs, why he decided to remove the word 'brilliant' from before 'seawater' in another sentence.

As a Yale creative writing professor, Cunningham is used to giving advice, and there is plenty of it in these pages. For his own 'propensity for elaborate language' he shares counsel from the novelist Hilma Wolitzer to 'rewrite all the A sentences... the show-offy ones', comparing this to how Coco Chanel would 'look in the mirror and take one thing off'. The book is also flush with inspirational (or in some cases quite cringey) quotations pulled out between chapters. There is Chekhov's 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass', and Toni Morrison's 'If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it'. At his best, Cunningham gestures at the magic in writing; at his worst, he risks breaking the spell.

Confused memories

Annie Walton Doyle

It Will Come Back to You
by Sigrid Nunez
Virago, £20, pp. 224

Readers of Sigrid Nunez's long-form fiction will be familiar with her concerns about storytelling: the gaps between what happened, what is remembered and what can be understood only through fictionalising. Her new collection of 13 stories, written across several decades, returns to questions of memory and the unreliability of narrative.

The stories tend to have mundane settings: an insomniac awake late at night; a traveller stranded by a flight delay. Nunez is less interested in dramatic incidents than in the way a passing encounter can alter one's understanding of life. Her narrators frequently find themselves re-evaluating past certainties or realising that events they thought they'd understood resist neat explanations. The titular story captures the collection's preoccupation, the phrase 'It will come back to you' holding a double meaning central to the volume: you will remember it, or you will inherit it. The past proves difficult either to remember fully or to escape.

That concern with the slipperiness of narrative is a strong through-line. In 'The Philosopher', memory, writing and living appear antithetical to one another, which is 'why we get so much wrong, why memory is so easily overruled by fiction, and why it can be so hard, no matter how we struggle, to get at the truth of our lives'. In 'The Naked Juror', writerly pursuits are viewed as oppositional to truth, with 'concern that a writer's imagination might get in the way of the all-important common sense, or that she might be tempted to turn the case into a story'. Nunez continues to return to the possibility that experience acquires shape only when it is turned into a narrative, but warns that the resulting shape may be misleading.

Although many of the pieces are concerned with storytelling, they are not formally metafictional. Instead, Nunez embeds questions about narrative in reflective, conversational accounts of ordinary experience. The stories may begin with the mundane and end somewhere unexpectedly lofty, but the transition doesn't feel forced. One recollection leads to another in the associative manner of thought itself. Characters discover that the events they recall most clearly are often the ones they understand least.

Nunez returns repeatedly to this gap between what happened and the story later told about it. The title story mourns 'the idea that a human life isn't like a novel, that there is no plot, no narrative arc'. Yet the collection as a whole demonstrates why people continue searching for one – as life without a story is something 'the human heart will not have'.

Nature's freeloaders

James Bradley

Hidden Creatures: Luscious Leeches, Bashful Botflies and the Wondrous History-Shaping World of Parasites
by Dino J. Martins
William Collins, £22, pp. 336

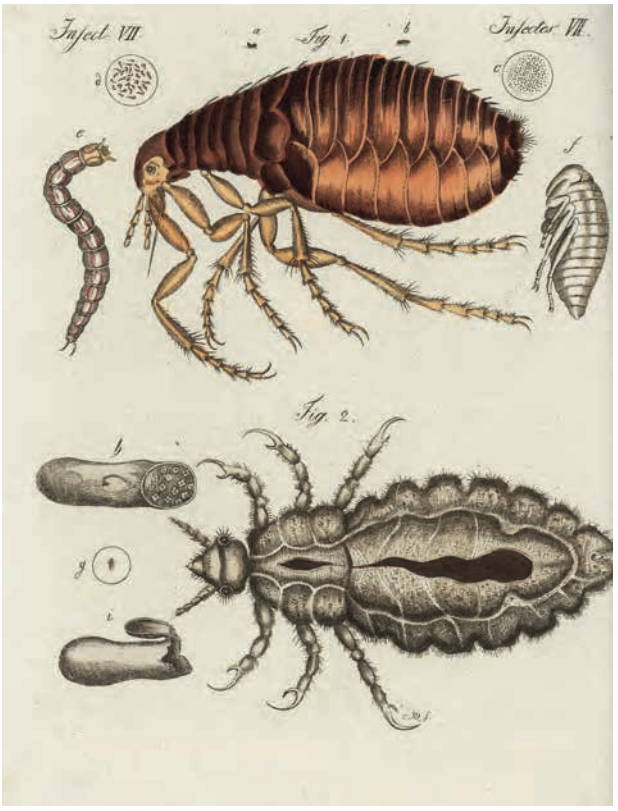
The oldest surviving sentence ever written in the first alphabet is inscribed on an ivory comb found in the ruins of the Canaanite city of Lachish in what today is Israel. Dating back around 3,700 years, it offers the owner a blessing of sorts: 'May this tusk root out the lice of the hair and the beard.'

As Dino J. Martins points out in his marvellously entertaining tour of the netherworld of parasites, the comb (the design of which is almost indistinguishable from the plastic ones we use for the same purpose today) speaks of the depth of the human relationship with lice – creatures that have travelled with us, fed on us and multiplied with us for millions of years.

Martins is the perfect guide. An entomologist and evolutionary biologist, he is a professor at New York's Stony Brook University and a former director of the Turkana Basin Institute and Mpala Research Centres. He is also, as *Hidden Creatures* makes clear, really, really into parasites. His love of his native Kenya, and Africa more generally, suffuses the book, which is filled with often ecstatic descriptions of the African landscape and the myriad forms of parasitic life that teem within it. But it is undergirded by a principle he learned from his primary school teachers: pay attention to details.

In writing about the natural world, noticing is not merely good reporting, it is an ethical act. To observe and then capture in words is to bring forth the unseen, to make the complexity of the world around us manifest. And Martins does this beautifully. The following is a description of an elephant carcass in Tsavo being devoured. There is a 'sound: a soft, steady, rasping hum, the sound of... millions of maggot mouths... scraping and slurping'. Stripping back the hide reveals 'a boiling cauldron of maggot stew that undulates in steamy waves. Annoyed... by the exposure to the hot, bright sunshine, the maggots squirm about and shimmer within a rainbow patina of digestive juices.'

Although the narrative occasionally groans under the cumulative weight, this delight in detail is part of what makes *Hidden Creatures* such a joy. As Martins careens through the mind-boggling diversity of parasites, he delivers a seemingly endless array of eye-popping facts. There are more than 10,000 species of tapeworm known to science, 'sprinkled across a smorgasbord of hosts' that range from fish to birds, reptiles, humans and other mammals. The tapeworms vary in size from a couple of centimetres long, that live in the bellies of shrews, to ones that can grow to 40 metres, that inhabit sperm whales and produce around 700,000 eggs a day that are released into the ocean in the whale's excrement. (Seals are also popular hosts for tapeworms: on average the guts of Weddell seals contain 1.3 million.)



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Coloured engraving of a human flea (Pulex irritans) and a human louse (Pediculus humanus). From Friedrich Johann Bertuch's Picture Book for Children, 1795

Birds are hosts to multiple species of chewing lice, which have evolved from the lice that once infested the bodies of dinosaurs. These are adapted to thrive on different parts of birds, so that those that live on their heads and necks tend to be a different shape to the ones that live on their bodies, since they do not have to survive the attentions of preening beaks. Bedbugs seem to have jumped from bats to humans before hitching a ride out of Africa with *Homo erectus* around 1.9 million years ago.

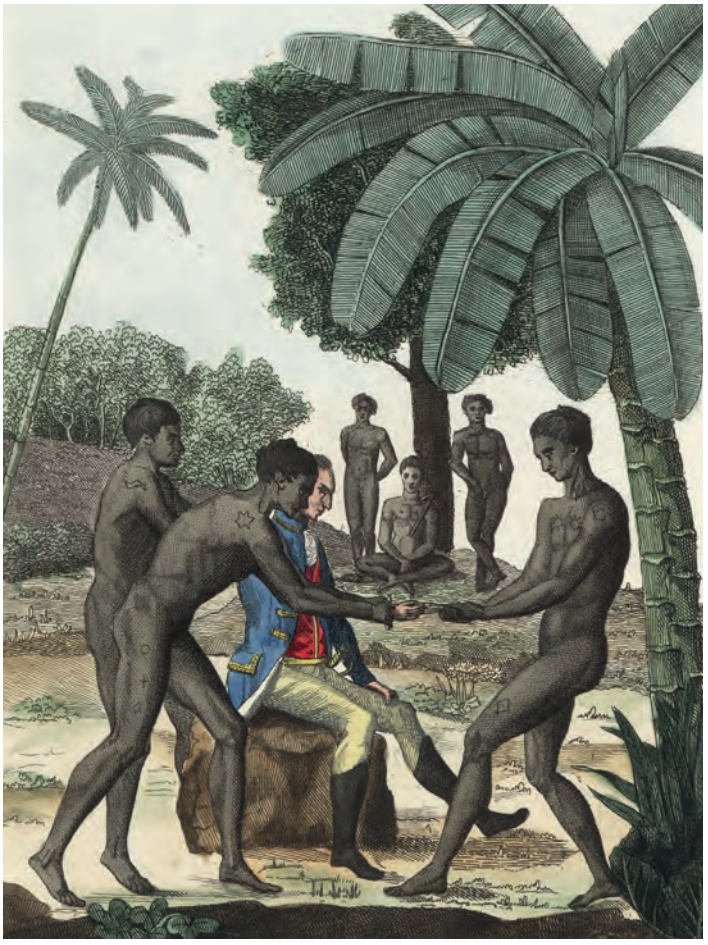
The larvae of the truly disgusting eye worm swim out of the eye in tears

The mind-bending complexity of the life cycles of many parasites is similarly extraordinary. The larvae of the truly disgusting eye worm, which live in the eyelids, orbit and membranes of the eyes of various mammals (including, I'm sorry to say, humans), swim out of the eye in tears. They are then lapped up by flies; and once inside the flies, they burrow through their bodies to the testes or eggs, where they develop into a new larval stage. This then migrates to the head of the fly, so that the next time it lands on an animal to lap its tears they can swim up into its eyes and begin the cycle again.

While Martins is keen to recalibrate our attitude to parasites by highlighting their diversity and adaptability, he is equally clear about their negative impacts. Parasites cause untold misery – from the horror of the guinea worm, which, after growing to a metre in length in the intestines, migrates out into the body and slowly emerges through the skin over the course of several days; to the river blindness caused by a worm, spread by blackflies, that still afflicts millions of people in parts of Africa; to mosquito-borne malaria, which has killed more human beings than any other disease in history.

As the spread of the house flea, which was carried to Europe from South America on Spanish and Portuguese ships, or sleeping sickness, which expanded across Africa on the coat-tails of the slave trade and colonial wars of conquest, make clear, commerce and colonisation have helped disperse many of these parasites and diseases. And, unsurprisingly, in many instances the prevalence of preventable diseases caused by parasites maps onto the legacies of inequity left by colonialism.

Today it is environmental change that is driving the spread of parasites. As the planet heats up, mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, Ross River fever, the Usutu virus and dengue fever are reaching new areas. Nonetheless, for Martins the question of whether we can, or even should, try to eliminate parasites is complex. Although eradicating diseases alleviates misery, it also throws up new challenges. Studies suggest that a lack of exposure to microbes and parasites in childhood increases our susceptibility to allergic and autoimmune diseases. And the more we learn about the microbiome that surrounds and permeates our bodies, the more it seems our health depends upon immersion in a diverse ecosystem. Seen through this lens, the seemingly inexhaustible diversity of parasites is not a threat but rather a reminder of the deep, resonant interconnectedness of the world around us, which we ignore at our peril.



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Captain Henry Wilson is invested as a member of the rupaks class on Koror Island, Palau, in 1783. Decades later, the Mentor's crew hoped for a similar reception

Grief on the reef

Michael Taube

The Wreck of the Mentor: A True Story of Death, Despair and Deliverance in the Age of Sail
by Eric Jay Dolin
W.W. Norton, £20, pp. 272

When the American shipbuilder Enos Bright constructed the *Mentor* in 1807 he had no inkling of the tale it would one day tell from its watery grave. Many ships faced harrowing voyages on the high seas, but this one stood out more than others. It was an expedition that turned into a disaster that few could have foreseen.

Eric Jay Dolin brings this long-forgotten story back into the public eye. The author of 17 books that have largely focused on maritime history, he is a talented researcher and natural storyteller. 'The *Mentor*,' he writes, 'is not just another example of a shipwreck during the Age of Sail. It is one of the most complex and intriguing of such stories ever told.' It contains many twists and turns, and a 'cast of fascinating characters that are forced by dramatic circumstances into a sometimes deadly and almost always fraught embrace'.

Bright's original vision for the *Mentor* was of a merchant ship. It was later converted into a whaler, which Dolin describes as a 'floating killing machine', used for chasing and harpooning whales. The ship's owner, William Rotch Rodman, profited handsomely from the sale of whale meat and oil from rendered blubber. Whaling expeditions in a then-unregulated market steadily increased to meet the demands of consumers.

The Mentor's crew had hurriedly to prove they weren't English, or they were done for

The Mentor might have been nothing more than a historical footnote had it not been for one fateful voyage. The ship set sail on 21 July 1831 from New Bedford, Massachusetts, then America's foremost whaling port and nicknamed 'the city that lit the world'. The captain was Edward Barnard, already a sea dog at the age of 31. His crew of 21 included his brother-in-law James Meader and eight 'green hands' with no whaling experience. They dreamt of returning home with great riches.

The whaling expedition began in Cape Cod and continued to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Unsuccessful but undaunted, Barnard then crossed the Atlantic to the Azores, where he hoped his luck would change. He sailed down Africa's western coast, then round the Cape of Good Hope to Mozambique and the Comoros, north-west of Madagascar. He followed the Indian Ocean to Timor in March 1832 and set a course for Guam. But on 21 May the ship foundered on a reef in Palau, an archipelago in the western Pacific Ocean about 500 miles due east of the Philippines.

Dolin's masterful storytelling is on full display as he details how the shipwrecked men faced indecision, intrigue and sheer terror in a part of the world they barely knew. After hitting the reef, they didn't all go in the same direction. The first mate, Thomas Colesworthy, fearing that the *Mentor* would break up, took the quarter boat with nine others. They were never heard of again. Barnard convinced the remaining ten men to join him in the whaleboat, carrying supplies including clothes, gunpowder and pistols. They were the luckier ones.

They ultimately reached the island of Babeldaob, where the sight of 'naked, heavily armed Palauans standing on the edge of the cay' could have ended badly. Barnard had already told his crew about Henry Wilson, the captain of the *Antelope*, a packet ship wrecked off Ulong in Palau in 1783, who developed good relations with the supreme chief of Koror and his son Prince Lee Boo. Barnard felt that could be repeated; but there was one problem. When his crew reached the village of Ngarchelong and sought assistance, they discovered that the villagers mistook them for English, whom they regarded as 'enemies', because the *Antelope*'s survivors had helped Koror 'achieve a position of dominance in Palau'. The *Mentor*'s sailors had hurriedly to prove they were American, not English, or they were done for.

They eventually surrendered on the island of Tobi, where they were enslaved. While the Tobians were 'most definitely not savages', writes Dolin, it was still a small, primitive and remote island. Barnard managed to escape in February 1833 aboard the Spanish merchant ship *Sabina*. He pleaded with the captain, D.A. Somes, to rescue his men as well, but to no avail – possibly because the latter 'feared being surrounded and overpowered by the natives'. Thankfully, some crew members and one Ngarchelongese chief escaped Tobi in dramatic fashion the following year.

The Wreck of the Mentor is a fascinating adventure story – one which the Age of Sail produced few quite like. Dolin's keen observational eye will ensure that it will never be forgotten again.

The tables turn

Mark Piesing

Bytes and Bullets: Global Rivalries, Private Tech and the Future of Modern Warfare
by Steve Feldstein
Monoray, £25, pp. 400

On 27 January 2024, Iranian-backed militants launched a one-way attack drone at the US base known as Tower 22 in the Syria-Iraq borderlands. It hit and killed three American soldiers and injured many other members of the 350-strong garrison. The attack was a pivotal moment. Before it, no US ground troops had been killed by an enemy aircraft since the Korean War. But they had been now, and would be again. Two years later, a similar attack, this time by Iran itself, evaded US air defences, hit a US command centre in Kuwait and killed six personnel. It was the deadliest Iranian strike of the recent conflict.

Steve Feldstein is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an expert on technology, democracy and national security and an award-winning author. His first book, *The Rise of Digital Repression*, explored how authoritarian leaders use technology to strengthen their power. Now, in his timely, challenging and ambitious *Bytes and Bullets*, he turns his attention to the way technology is transforming how nations compete and wage war, increasing instability and threatening to disrupt the old hierarchy of nations.

At the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged 'sitting alone' atop the international pecking order. Globalisation and free trade had seemingly delivered relative peace and prosperity to the world, while further entrenching US power. But, Feldstein argues, after an extensive programme of research in various geopolitical hotspots, including Lebanon, Turkey and Ukraine as well as Silicon Valley, the US government did something that few, if any, great powers had done before or are likely to do again: it shared its Cold-War-winning innovations with the world.

While this radical new policy of 'open innovation' bound more countries to its new world order, it also empowered the states and insurgents that opposed it. Technologies that had been developed for nuclear war, such as GPS, integrated circuits and the precursor to the internet, made both the iPhone and the attack on Tower 22 possible. Consequently, the author believes, the West is in a 'new technology Cold War' with China, Russia and other rising tech powers such as Iran that few of its leaders want to acknowledge or do anything about – a war that it risks losing if it doesn't act quickly.

Feldstein powerfully and succinctly captures milestone moments to illustrate how the West's rivals are not only rapidly, cheaply and successfully adapting western military technology to their own purposes, but also how they try to negate its advantages. These moments range from the 2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia war, during which the former's cheap drones devastated the latter's conventionally armed military – when Armenian soldiers heard the 'shrill scream' of an Israeli Harop attack drone 'they knew they had seven seconds' to take cover; to Ukraine's audacious Operation Spider's Web, which launched waves of AI-equipped drones from shipping containers near Russian airbases to destroy its nuclear bomber fleet; to the fall from grace of Jack Ma, the celebrity founder of the Chinese e-commerce site Alibaba, and his unexpected resurrection as an AI pioneer.

Feldstein even captures the moment Russia effectively took over Morocco's state-owned Tanger Med port complex to evade sanctions. He also explores how – worse for the West – such adversaries are independently developing their own destructive technological innovations using AI systems, satellite internet or advanced semiconductors from private companies, not government labs, which the West is failing to look for, creating a fatal 'blind spot'.

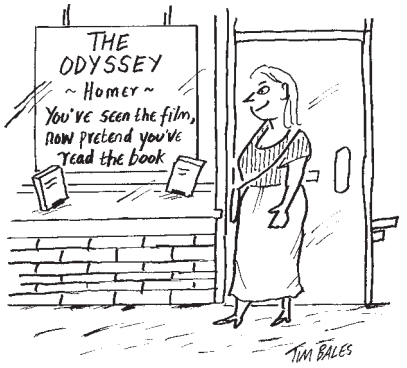
Bytes and Bullets is certainly compelling. Feldstein combines a deft turn of phrase with in-depth research, convincing illustrative vignettes and some of the most effective tables I have seen in a book to tell a very technical story in a manner that reads like a thriller.

The runaway mother

Susie Mesure

Gaining Ground
by Joan Barfoot
Faber, £9.99, pp. 304

When a girl turns up at an isolated cabin in Canada, unannounced and uninvited, the woman busy thinning the lettuce has no idea who the stranger is. But then the woman has trouble remembering even her own name. '"Are you Abra Phillips?" asks the girl. "Am I?" the woman ponders, conscious that the words "mean something" to the girl,' writes Joan Barfoot in the opening pages of *Gaining Ground*, a Canadian feminist classic now republished nearly 50 years after it first appeared as a debut novel entitled *Abra*.



'I think, finally, that I must be; there is no one else to connect with this name,' continues the protagonist, who we soon learn has been alone in the cabin for the past nine years, all but living off the land after walking out on her family. The girl, whom Abra does not recognise and cannot place, is her daughter. Now 18, Katie wants to know why her mother exploded their family, disappearing without a trace and without looking back at what she left behind.

This opening, delivered in succinct, unsentimental prose, takes barely ten pages; but it sets up the conflict at the heart of this existential masterpiece as a battle between selfhood and motherhood. Who is Abra the hermit and who was Abra the mother? Can they even be the same person? Katie's arrival prompts a soul-searching reckoning that forces Abra to hunt for memories that were long gone. To Abra, alone in a cabin she bought in secret with her grandmother's inheritance, it had seemed 'quite natural that all the past should die, as the person who lived it had'.

If it seems unlikely that a mother would abandon her children, consider how many fathers do the same thing

With the benefit of hindsight, Abra is able to present herself as two different people. 'And what right does this woman have to selfish pleasure? None; she made her life, she must live with the consequences,' the free Abra thinks, looking back on her former existence as a young mother, defined only by her two children, Katie and her elder brother, Elliot. Rights and responsibilities are themes that run through the novel, which has echoes in Maria Engel's *Bear,* another Canadian woman's quest for freedom, also published in the late 1970s.

If it seems unlikely that a mother would abandon her children, consider how many fathers do the same thing. Barfoot, now 80, whose novel *Critical Injuries* was on the 2002 Booker longlist, makes it clear that Abra was suffering from some form of nervous breakdown, but resists using this to explain her departure. She also avoids making any of the other characters problematic in any way. Given the era, Abra's husband, Stephen, is surprisingly empathetic.

The reason this book still feels fresh is that many of us have been Abra Phillips at some point in our lives. Read it and feel vicariously emboldened, and then join me in digging out more of Barfoot's 11-strong backlist.

GETTY IMAGES

Mars has always excited the imagination, but most in the scientific community insist there is no life there

The lure of the red planet

David Honigmann

Meet the Neighbors: Life on Mars and How to Find It
by Steven A. Benner
Allen Lane, £25, pp. 406

'Is there life on Mars?,' asked David Bowie, and would not stay for an answer. The astrobiologist Steven Benner has an answer – which is that Mars not only has had life but still does. The first part of that answer is broadly accepted; the second remains highly contentious. His book is a scattershot plea for increased attention to be paid to searching for evidence – or, as he sees it, more evidence. The stakes are high. As he says in his introduction, if life exists only on Earth, that's a coincidence; if it exists on Earth and a close neighbour, that's the start of a pattern.

Mars has always excited the imagination. No one has ever speculated hubristically about the chances of anything coming from Mercury. C.S. Lewis apart, the literature of Venus is as thin as its atmosphere is dense. It is Mars where Elon Musk dreams of dying – 'but not on impact'. As Benner notes, the film of Andy Weir's book *The Martian* made $630 million worldwide; throwing in *Interstellar* and *Arrival* brings the total pretty close to the budget of an actual Mars mission.

Benner's advocacy is needed, because for half a century the consensus among what he terms 'the community' has been that the planet shows no signs of life. Benner describes how the Viking mission in 1976 intended, among other priorities, to detect life. The three main experiments, on their own terms, showed positive results, albeit not without complications. Another less sensitive experiment, GC-MS, appeared to show the reverse – again not without complications. Initial reports were soon drowned out by a community view that the Viking results proved the precise opposite of what they actually suggested. Gerald Soffen, the mission's chief scientist, declared: 'That's the ballgame, no organics on Mars, no life.'

Benner then maps the reputational and financial risks of departing from this consensus: the political processes that allocate scarce taxpayer dollars to a handful of approved space science projects. Gil Levin, a sewage engineer who designed detection systems for bacteria, one of which flew on Viking, and who was an early sceptic of GC-MS, presented his arguments at the National Academy of Sciences to a hostile reaction. 'Attendees shouted invectives at me. They were ready to throw shrimp at me from the shrimp bowl. One former adviser said: "You've disgraced yourself, and you've disgraced science."' Anyone who has voiced an unpopular truth in a large organisation will recognise the tone.

It is Mars where Elon Musk dreams of dying – 'but not on impact'

Essentially, Benner argues, all the institutional incentives impel towards overcaution. It's much safer to insist that there is no life on Mars than to suggest that there is and be proved wrong.

But this is not, in principle, how the scientific method works. Theories are meant to be the best possible explanation, given current evidence – always subject to later revision as new data and new interpretations emerge. Of course, as Thomas Kuhn declared in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, changing a dominant paradigm is uphill work because, unsurprisingly, scientists are no happier to be proved wrong than any other eminences. In Max Planck's aphorism: 'Science advances one funeral at a time.'

Benner is horrified at how this is evidenced in his particular field:

> Science cannot work if scientific reputations can be 'damaged' by a good-faith interpretation of data that later turns out to be wrong. After all, the same describes most interpretations of most experiments in most of the biggest science. Even the reputations of Newton, Einstein and Darwin are 'damaged' by this standard. Yet that was the culture.

The culture prevailed to the extent that for decades the committees that governed science funding ignored, or failed to understand, or failed to take seriously, subsequent work that questioned Soffen's calling of the ballgame.

Now the competition is heating up. Nasa aims to establish human settlement on the Moon in the 2030s; either the Chinese or SpaceX or both may beat it there. Uncrewed probes are going there first. So Benner sets out four propositions: that life arose on Mars; that it is still extant there;

that it can be identified when found; and that the places where it can be found can be accessed. He ends with a call for the astrobiologists of the world to unite to design the experiments needed and to lobby for them.

A Martian might wonder who this book is for. The most interesting of its narratives, to a lay reader, is about the institutional failures of academic science. There is also an increasingly detailed set of arguments about extraterrestrial organic chemistry, which will soon tax the abilities of anyone without a degree in the subject. Tonally it ranges from the out of touch (science fiction references from the 1960s; constant allusions to humans as 'ape descendants') to the patronising: 'Now it is time for you to play Sherlock Holmes. You are a clever person. You are (we hope) not infected by the biases of the culture.' The text is studded with the kind of relentlessly unfunny cartoons that a professor might deploy to amuse his dopier students. This manifesto would have lifted off faster with a tighter, lighter payload.

Creepy cute

Huw Nesbitt

Sail Away Land
by Ben Pester
Granta, £14.99, pp. 208

A spectre is haunting England in the surreal tales assembled in Ben Pester's *Sail Away Land*, the follow-up to his debut collection *Am I in the Right Place?* (2020) and last year's novel *The Expansion Project*: the spectre of tweeness.

Confronted with scenarios involving nightmarish gatherings, paranormal entities and psychic electronic devices, his characters respond with a lobotomised, quaint strain of stoicism – the type that makes us say things like 'It'll come out in the wash' when getting made redundant, and 'Least said…' when handed a terminal diagnosis.

'You have left the grill on!' repeatedly frets the title story's nameless protagonist, like a Tony Hancock character, oblivious to the fact he is also apparently shrinking to the size of a rat. Narrated by his television, who reads his mind as he attempts to blot out a break-up and work troubles by watching a dour crime drama, the protagonist's story overlaps with the TV programme. 'Is any of this real?' he wonders. In the end, his anxiety about his grill setting fire turns out to be well-founded. But what about the shrinking? At the heart of the story lie the myriad ways we conceal the horrors of everyday life with equally noxious fictions.

Other stories temper tweeness with even greater absurdity. In 'You and Me and Russell Palomet', the narrator daydreams about the 'super emperor bed' he'll enjoy on holiday, despite having been kidnapped on the way to the airport by a demonic force. In 'Catmint', the storyteller fixates on a picturesque sky while guests at his birthday party max out his credit cards; and in 'A Goshawk', a plague of stepdads annoy people with their niche obsessions following an 'interest rate hike by the Bank of England'. What unites this collection is an awareness of the role of language – particularly the cutesy, hyperbolic, online-inflected dialect of millennials – in softening an unforgiving world: hell mornings; dining-slash-play areas; steppies (stepfathers); shoffices (shed offices). They are terms with the ring of marketing guff that connote grief, forced compromises, struggles and decline.

The late theorist Mark Fisher described such aesthetics as boring dystopias – a risky territory for a writer. At times, Pester's tone does indeed grate, and his frequent use of second-person narration, which has the effect of placing the reader on the end of the hook, can be repetitious. Whether you'll play along, however, will ultimately depend on whether you accept *Sail Away Land*'s obvious premise: that a society as grotesque as ours can only be caricatured in bludgeoning phantasmagoria.

Poem after Three Words by Anne Truitt, Sculptor (1921-2004)

Private, intimate, sensate;
breaching that homeless ache
beyond the reach of language,
to make sculptures that seem
to float just above the ground,
narrow columns, six feet high,
clothed in succulent colours;
sentinels in communion,
sensate spirits always reaching
upward, into the light, letting go
the personal to know the divine.

Age eleven Anne longs to escape
from the private gloom of home;
is given a red and white bicycle,
explores her home town, mapping
Easton's grid pattern, cycling north,
south, east and west, memorising
its layout, until she knows every
alley, finds in a neglected yard,
a strange being, a mirror ball
reflecting the town, the trees,
her own face turned comical.

She grows too tall for the bicycle,
moves away, a war passes, she marries,
has three children, loses him to alcohol,
in time responds to the intimate tug
of the eastern shore of Maryland;
sifts through the sandbox of memory,
breakers spilling the ocean at her feet,
gathers her family to the feast, abides
with all those footsteps, printed along
the shoreline, generations trailing off
toward the horizon's gentle erasure.

– Colin Pink

Just eat your greens

James Ball

The Health and Wellness Lie: Exposing the Hype, Hacks and Hidden Agendas of the Well-Being Machine
by Nick Tiller
Green Tree, £22, pp. 320

No one could accuse Dr Nick Tiller of taking health and wellness issues lightly. In his latest book he recounts an occasion in which a friend asked him whether he was an extrovert or an introvert – the kind of question most of us would treat as small talk to pass the time. Tiller, though, took it seriously. What did she mean by those terms, he asked, hearing in response that it depended on whether he got energy from being around others, or not. OK, then: what did she mean by energy? 'At this point,' he writes, 'she got frustrated and didn't speak to me for the rest of her wedding. Which was awkward, since I was the best man.'

This anecdote characterises the tone of the book. Tiller sets himself up as a man who follows the science and evidence, and gets immensely frustrated when others don't – especially when they use pseudoscience to play on our ingrained fears about health and mortality to sell us stuff. He is at his best in that crusading mode. At one point he reveals how he was approached by a company with an eye to recruiting him for 'stealth marketing' – the effort to persuade experts who appear across the media to drop certain key words that might direct the public to a product while avoiding directly naming it. The result is a clever way to navigate rules on disclosure and advertising.

The section on nutritional supplements and vitamin pills, often mass-manufactured in China, is even more alarming. Some contain barely a fraction of the active substance they claim to, while others are adulterated. Certain herbal or homeopathic pills for insomnia are laced with pharmaceutical sleeping medications. Supplements to help you gain muscle mass secretly contain steroids. The wellness industry lacks many of the safeguards and controls of mainstream medicine, and it's putting us at risk.

For those who are already signed up to his crusade, Tiller is a convincing and entertaining guide, often indignant in the name of a cause he clearly sees as righteous. But if he's trying to convince people who are tempted by the health and wellness industry, realistically this book is not for them. Tiller's tone is so strident and his frustration so palpable that anyone who gives the time of day to these ideas is likely to bounce right off. The title alone is enough on that front.

The reality of dietary and exercise advice is boring: eat a broad diet, don't eat too much, cut back on red meat and build moderate exercise into your routine. Do that and you may live longer than you would otherwise, and you'll probably lose weight if you're obese. It'll take months, and you'll have to keep it up for the rest of your life.

That's hardly a great sales pitch, even if it's the only one that actually works. No wonder fad diets, miracle supplements and magic devices are more tempting. Tiller is ultimately left trying to do what doctors and dieticians have done for decades: give us the same dull advice and hope this time we'll listen. Trying the same thing and expecting different results, though, isn't exactly the best demonstration of the scientific method.

This makes it all the more frustrating that Tiller seems unexcited by recent developments such as GLP-1 weight loss drugs like Wegovy and Mounjaro. He avoids scaremongering, but is extremely cautious as to their potential. We would do better, he insists, if we just stuck to the long-

The wellness industry lacks many of the safeguards of mainstream medicine, and it's putting us at risk

standing advice – ignoring the fact that obesity has continued to escalate over the decades during which that advice has been endlessly repeated.

His devotion to the evidence has other blind spots, too. His long list of villains inevitably includes social media and online advertising – an area I know far better than nutrition, and one in which he seems to have accepted every doubtful marketing claim, even if only to rail against it. He confuses his terminology and vastly exaggerates the effectiveness of online advertisements, showing none of the scepticism he deploys so well elsewhere – maybe because, in this case, the exaggeration serves his argument. It is perhaps a useful reminder that critical thinking can only get us so far. However well-trained we are, we will never escape our biases.

The Health and Wellness Lie is a timely and often sharp investigation of a multi-billion-dollar global industry. But, ultimately, it is also yet another reminder that we should all just eat our greens.

'I haven't got a car. Can you water my lawn?'

Into the woods

Michael Arditti

Country People
by Daniel Mason
John Murray, £20, pp. 309

In his mid-forties, Miles Krzelewski is a graduate student who makes Saul Bellow's Herzog look like an academic overachiever. After 14 years and 11 changes of subject – including Rabelais's monsters, Chekhov's early humour and Tolstoy's train journeys and farming techniques – he has yet to complete his doctoral thesis.

When his wife, Kate, a respected Milton and Blake scholar, is offered a one-year visiting professorship at a rural Vermont college, Miles is thrilled, convinced that a pastoral life will afford him the inspiration he needs for his latest project – a study of Russian peasant folklore. Together with their children, 12-year-old Wesley and nine-year-old Olive, plus their dog, Giuseppe, they undertake the long journey from their Californian home.

Country People is a disarmingly self-aware novel, complete with authorial foreshadowing and direct addresses to the reader. It is therefore no surprise when Miles's assertion that nothing 'bad could happen from such lovely days' is almost immediately belied. At first, the 'simple city folk' are merely jolted by the harsh realities of the Vermont countryside, among them a property sign reading: 'Due to the price of bullets, warning shots will not be fired.' Soon, however, Miles becomes entangled with the shadowy Jeremiah Wilkes Society, an association that has consequences for the entire family, not least the impressionable Olive.

Wilkes, a fictional 19th-century pastor, left a detailed account of his descent into a subterranean world: an underground Atlantis, home to a sophisticated civilisation. Wilkes Society members now debate the implications of his *Colloquie*s, and search the surrounding forest for the fabled portal. Their ranks include Snowflake Bentley, named after a celebrated photographer whose spirit he believes has possessed him; Kayleigh Swan, Olive's teacher, who patrols the Vermont border against interlopers from neighbouring Massachusetts; and Clem, a pest controller, who makes house calls dressed as a rat.

Daniel Mason's prose, rich in wry observation, ensures that the darker elements of his plot never obscure its comic spirit. He deftly captures the hapless Miles and his repeated attempts to rationalise his predicament, while his skilful skewering of intellectual pretension, from a sociological study of 'Can-Throwing Behaviour of Rural American Males' to a third-grade production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a chorus of ten Pucks, makes for a novel of rare delight.

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Sunrise on Clacton beach, with the pier in the distance

Worth the detour

Olivia Potts

Where Tourists Seldom Tread: Postcards from Bypassed Britain
by Chris Moss
Guardian/Faber, £20, pp. 336

'Most people who have been to Crewe station have never been to Crewe.' In a moment of serendipity, my train pulls into Crewe station at the exact moment I turn the page to begin the chapter 'Changing Tracks' in Chris Moss's new travelogue *Where Tourists Seldom Tread*.

In his *Guardian* column 'Postcards from Britain', Moss visits and reconsiders 'improbable, bypassed and unloved' destinations, such as Warrington, Gateshead, Paisley, Clacton-on-Sea – and Crewe, which my train from London has reached after no small delay. Moss is right, of course: I have travelled through Crewe more times than I have eaten disappointing Upper Crust baguettes, but I have never actually been into the town.

It is here that Moss discovers a wealth of railway history, as well as the market hall, which once warehoused 200,000 tons of Cheshire cheese – and a lot of evidence of demolition. It becomes a template for his travels, in which he finds music, poetry, literature, art, architecture, and, very often, dilapidation. These apparently unremarkable towns contain multitudes, if only we can be bothered to look.

Moss's quiet curiosity is infectious. Over and over again I paused when reading to look up things he describes – the Warrington Academy, or a string of Lowry paintings, or Birkenhead's Woodside ventilation tower – 'a sublime expression of form meeting function... structural engineering as shadow-lith'. His precise architectural sketches do justice and bring personality to myriad seemingly unprepossessing places.

There is a real possibility when exploring such towns – some no longer destinations in their own right and most of them underfunded and forgotten – that the narrative could become jaded, cynical, belittling or contemptuous. Moss avoids this admirably, finding virtue in the exploration itself. Jaywick, bordering Clacton-on-Sea, was identified as England's most deprived neighbourhood in the government's Indices of Deprivation for 2010, 2015, 2019 and 2025. 'That in itself is no reason to stay away,' Moss tells us.

'Ugliness has as many forms as beauty, and it, too, is in the eye of the beholder'

Indeed, his approach to beauty – or its lack – is tender and thoughtful: 'Ugliness has as many forms as beauty, and it, too, is in the eye of the beholder.' He writes well about the unbeautiful without ever becoming Pollyanaish:

> It's not so much a mist as a whitish murk, a weakness of light due to the late season and lowering sky. Mirroring the grasping raised hands of wintry trees are bare branches plunged into still water, in turn reflected there. I think of flooded forests on the upper Amazon. But I'm in Warrington.

How could you not wish to read on and discover more about what Moss finds there?

'My hope is that readers will want to visit the places I have included,' he says early on. This wasn't quite how the book left me feeling. Instead, I experienced a more holistic reframing. I do not, for example, need to go to Felling, an industrial suburb of Gateshead six miles from where I grew up, because I passed through it twice daily for more than a decade. But I still had no idea that it was named after the open area created when woodlands were cut down to build ships some 850 years ago (although other sources dispute this). It's less that I didn't know this, more that it had never occurred to me to question it. The fact that Ipswich is twice as old as Machu Picchu doesn't fill me with a yearning to go there; but it makes me wonder why I value aspects of geography, history and architecture in certain settings but don't consider them in others. As Moss puts it: 'History flows through everything.'

In St Helens, a town which neighbours where Moss grew up, the slamming together of the past, present and future is almost unbearably poignant:

> You have to write quickly when it comes to British towns. Their buildings drop faster than you can type. Today is 6 May 2025; in 11 days the bus station will be closed to be razed. The buses were: the 329 to Southport and home; the 10 to Liverpool and the university; the 141 to Earlestown via Burtonwood.

Inevitably, *Where Tourists Seldom Tread* will form a snapshot – a postcard, if you will – of Britain during the few years Moss has been visiting these places. But his book will stand as a document, a witness statement, that we will no doubt return to, as some things change and some stay exactly the same.

ARTS

Culture wars

Will Unesco last another 80 years – and does it deserve to, asks *Alex Diggins*

The FIM-92 Stinger missile is not a subtle weapon. An anti-aircraft rocket, capable of launching a high-explosive 'fire and forget' laser-guided warhead at targets up to 5km away, it can be carried and operated by only one man. During the 1980s Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the CIA provided hundreds of Stingers to the Mujahideen, where they proved terrifyingly lethal, downing scores of helicopter gunships and killing thousands of Soviet troops. But, at times, they've been as effective against other, more unusual targets.

In 2001, during the first Taliban administration of Afghanistan, the group's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, ordered the destruction of the monumental Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley, a historic Silk Road site deep within the Hindu Kush. Over the course of 25 days, Taliban fighters used Stinger missiles, as well as tanks, RPGs, mines and dynamite, to obliterate the statues. These masterworks of Gandharan Buddhism, which stood higher than Nelson's Column and predated the foundation of Islam, were reduced to rubble, leaving only their massive, empty niches behind.

Now, under the second Taliban administration, one organisation is promoting Bamiyan as an established attraction for Afghanistan's 'danger tourists'. One Australian travel influencer captioned a recent Facebook post: 'At the Buddha's [*sic*] of Bamiyan. A truly wonderful spot!'

The world reacted with impotent horror to the Taliban's iconoclasm in 2001. But in theory an organisation exists that might have prevented it: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco). Founded in November 1945, during the post-second world war surge in optimism, it's best known today for its World Heritage List, which includes historic sites – Stonehenge, Machu Picchu – as well as unique landscapes and biospheres, such as the Great Barrier Reef and the Philippines's Batad rice terraces. But its original mandate was broader and utopian: to promote global peace through international cooperation, as well as preserving and protecting the world's heritage.

Yet today, even Unesco's fiercest champions might admit it has somewhat taken its eyes off the ball. The organisation celebrated its 80th anniversary in fine style last summer. But the scale of global cultural desecration during the past two decades has made the Taliban's efforts in 2001 look a bit half-hearted. During Isis's occupation of Iraq and Syria, militants dynamited the 2,000-year-old Temple of Bel in Palmyra, razed the ancient city of Nimrud and took sledgehammers to artefacts in Mosul museum. The Chinese government's persecution of the Uyghur people has involved destroying hundreds of mosques, using bulldozers to plough up traditional graveyards, and systematic cultural genocide through mass 're-education camps'. And the ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine and Iran have taken a heavy toll on heritage, as hundreds of historic buildings and locations have been damaged or entirely erased by war.

The recent scale of global cultural desecration has made the Taliban's efforts in 2001 look a bit half-hearted

Last month, Unesco's World Heritage Committee gathered for its annual convention in Busan, South Korea. But at a time when even once-robust international institutions such as Nato look shaky, how can an organisation that has declared Italian pasta a vital part of the world's cultural heritage retain its credibility? Put another way: will Unesco survive another 80 years – and does it deserve to?

Unesco's eternal problem is cash. 'In my life, budgets have always been short – I never had a budget with too much money!' says Francesco Bandarin, who served as director of the World Heritage Centre and Unesco's assistant director-general for culture. Unesco's funding comes from its 194 member states. They contribute via assessed contributions – measured as a proportion of GDP – and voluntary contributions, which are often earmarked for special projects. On paper, this system seems fair; in reality, it's a nightmare for an organisation whose leadership rotates every four years. It also gives the richest members an outsize influence: geopolitical petulance means poverty for Unesco.

The US, for instance, has crashed in and out of Unesco three times since its founding. The first departure was under Ronald Reagan in 1983, and it has left twice since, in 2017 and 2026, both times under Donald Trump. (Margaret Thatcher also withdrew the UK in 1985, before Tony Blair rejoined in 1997.) But the bigger issue is that since 2011 – the year that Unesco voted to allow Palestine to become a member – the US hasn't paid its assessed contributions. Before 2011, it contributed 22 per cent of the organisation's budget. Now, it has racked up more than $600 million in debts. President Biden decried Trump's decision to leave, and brought the US back in 2023. He didn't, though, repay the debt.

'It was a colossal cut in contributions,' says Bandarin. 'A time of great turmoil and a financial catastrophe.' The 'fatal decision' to admit Palestine and the 'wicked, unsolvable problem' of its conflict with Israel, has continued to haunt Unesco, Bandarin tells me. Israel withdrew in 2019, and the US is scheduled to leave at the end of the year. (Occasionally, this tussling plays out as farce: a meeting was once delayed because attendee names were placed alphabetically, putting Israel and Iran next to each other.) China is now poised to become Unesco's biggest funder – and steering influence.

But Unesco has made other unforced errors too. A perennially prickly area is the World Heritage List. The annual convention at which new sites are inscribed has become 'Eurovision for monuments', in the words of one insider. Attendees describe an unseemly jostling for inscription, as even the most wretched administrations crave the soft-power cachet of a Unesco World Heritage site designation. 'It's become a market for member states to swap favours… Culture is politics, and politics is culture, so of course things happen under the table,' says Bandarin.

This horse-trading and Unesco's desire for fair representation leads to absurd contortions: France, for instance, has 54 World Heritage Sites; but the countries with most World Heritage sites per kilometre are the Caribbean islands. 'It's got silly,' says Marc Patry, who spent more than a decade working for the World Heritage Convention. 'There's

ATTA KENARE / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

The damaged interiors of the Unesco-listed Golestan Palace, which once served as the residence of the Qajar dynasty and is one of the oldest sites in Tehran

almost 200 countries on the planet, and some of them are pretty damn tiny. So could it be possible that somewhere like Barbados just isn't as well endowed with natural and cultural history as somewhere like France or China? Wales has nine World Heritage sites – Wales is nice and all, but come on!'

But you can at least visit World Heritage sites; they give you something to do on a drizzly afternoon abroad. It's harder to make the same argument for Unesco's list of 'intangible' cultural assets. Consisting of more than 800 practices and customs across 157 countries, it's a bewildering pick'n'mix that includes such imperishable traditions as Neapolitan pizza twirling, Filipino salt collection and Czech amateur theatre.

The convention on intangible heritage was only ratified in 2003. And some Unesco old-timers resent it, arguing that it smothers the impact and good the organisation does. After all, it's hard to conceive of another body – aside, perhaps, from the UN – which has such a truly global mandate and authority. This means that, alongside safeguarding the inalienable rights of Turkmen dog breeders, Unesco is also responsible for the tsunami early-warning system that protects coastlines in more than 30 countries.

'Unesco is not run by one country like the US or China. That gives it enormous licence,' argues Natarajan Ishwaran, who joined Unesco in 1986 and led its division of ecological sciences. He points out that his team continued to monitor DRC's five World Heritage biospheres during its bloody civil war, and were allowed to inspect the three sites which were outside the Kinshasa government's control. Likewise, during the frostiest parts of the Cold War, Unesco provided a unique forum for American and Soviet scientists to collaborate on sensitive technologies such as satellites and remote-sensing equipment. Today, it fulfils a similar function: US and Chinese AI researchers have shared their findings under the aegis of Unesco.

The cultural asset list includes Neapolitan pizza twirling and Czech amateur theatre

'I was born in Sri Lanka, studied in the States, and spent my career working in Paris and now China – that wouldn't have been possible without Unesco,' says Ishwaran. 'It's a very important multilateral system. No one says it's perfect, or that it doesn't need reform, but education, science and culture are the three main areas of human endeavour. And nothing else provides a forum for nearly 200 countries to discuss them.'

Patry agrees. 'If you were to reinvent Unesco, it probably wouldn't look like it does now – but you would need something similar. We need platforms to discuss these things. The Unesco headquarters in Paris is a strange building. People would ask me for tours, and I'd say there's nothing to see, it's just meeting rooms. Because that's what we would do: arrange meetings. We bring people together.'

So can Unesco survive? It's hard today, in our fractured, multipolar world, to imagine the white heat of confidence that led to its foundation, under the guiding mission of putting 'peace into the minds of men'. It's easy to mock this loftiness, but it also explains Unesco's durability. If you set aside the flim-flammery and absurdity of how it occasionally operates, Unesco is built on a bedrock of idealism that is harder to sneer at.

At its core is a statement about how the world is – and how we wish it to be. Without Unesco, or something like it, the world stage becomes a bare and Hobbesian place: nasty, beauty-less, and shorn of history. A vision encapsulated by Bamiyan's empty niches. Perhaps the question, then, is not whether Unesco can last another 80 years – but, can we afford it not to? Just ask the Neapolitan dough tossers.

Tom Holland as Spider-Man

Cinema

Splitting headache

James Walton

Spider-Man: Brand New Day
12A, Nationwide

Remember Peter Parker? By the end of the last instalment of the *Spider-Man* movies, *No Way Home*, we were the only ones who could. Following a characteristically complicated but deft collision of multiverses, young Peter (Tom Holland) had realised that the only way to save the world (again) was by getting Doctor Strange to cast a spell that made everybody – including his best friend Ned (Jacob Batalon) and girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) – forget that he'd ever been Spider-Man.

He therefore began his Brand New Day alone in his apartment with only a highly evolved piece of AI for company. Sure, he'd returned to his roots of capturing local crooks by the dozen. But while this restored the hero status that J. Jonah Jameson had motivelessly tried to undermine in *No Way Home*, it failed to cure his loneliness. 'Spider-Man has to do the hard thing,' he mused, 'even if it breaks Peter Parker's heart.'

And for much of the film, this was the crisis he was facing. Having resolved to go all-in with being Spidey at the expense of Peter, he found his arachnoid hormones increasing – symptoms of which included blinding headaches, out-of-control web manufacture and existential angst. As a result, he consulted Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), these days a good-natured university lecturer, on how he had kept the Hulk from taking him over and was told about a handy DNA-inhibiting device. But, as Banner said, what if this also inhibited traits that needed to be expressed, especially when fighting monsters?

Thanks to that aplomb I mentioned, the film is a complete blast

Sadly, this warning proved prescient – because being just Peter not only rendered him a less effective fighting machine, but also left him feeling incomplete. The answer, he gradually came to understand, was to accept both parts of himself, however painful that might prove.

In other words, the Tom Holland *Spider-Man* films have followed a familiar trajectory for superheroes and the more ordinary kind alike. The first one, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, was an essentially jolly affair in which Peter's frank enjoyment of his powers formed part of a smart and funny teen movie, complete with awkward crushes and lots of milling around high-school lockers. The second, *Spider-Man: Far from Home*, featured a school trip to Europe but retained a similar tone – at least until towards the end, when it became more melancholy. This process then intensified in *No Way Home* where the jokes largely disappeared and the cost of being Spider-Man emerged. Now, in *Brand New Day*, we get a full-blown meditation on this cost – just as we've had on that of being Batman, Sherlock Holmes and even Hercule Poirot in various media over the years.

Personally, I prefer it when these people aren't engaged in a deep inner reckoning – and for the first section here, the audience will surely miss Ned and MJ as much as Peter does. Yet, as ever, the *Spider-Man* franchise went about its chosen work with undeniable aplomb, helped greatly by Holland's ability to reflect all aspects of his character's predicament.

And, of course, there was plenty of other stuff going on too. For one thing, a stolen tank was heading towards a detention facility where many a supervillain was being held. For another, the tank turned out to be driven by an elderly female janitor whose mind had somehow fallen under the control of person or persons unknown.

Nor was she the only one, as we dis-

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covered when we were constantly wrong-footed by goodies turning out to be baddies and vice versa. I'll refrain from spoilers but I think I can say that when Spidey identified the criminal mastermind behind it all, he decided this was someone who hadn't had the breaks and was to be healed rather than exterminated.

Both the wrong-footing and the urge to heal have been regular features of the previous Holland films. So, despite the title, and the presence of a brand new director in the shape of Destin Daniel Cretton, this one can't be called a startlingly fresh take. The same applies to the many swinging scenes and spectacular fights, which by now (and perhaps unfairly) feel less like eye-popping revelations of what cinema can do and more like the return of old friends.

Thanks to that aplomb I mentioned, however, the result is still a complete blast. Granted, it probably won't make much sense to people who haven't seen its predecessors, and even they might have a few head-scratching moments if they – like your reviewer – lack an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Marvel Cinematic Universe: 38 films and counting, plus 17 TV series. Even so – and I don't mean this in the least pejoratively (and nor should anyone who isn't a colossal snob) – *Brand New Day* is a triumph of Hollywood professionalism.

Classical music

Aussie rules

Richard Bratby

The Importance of Being Earnest
Garsington Opera

BBC Symphony Orchestra/Oramo; Sinfonia of London/Wilson
Royal Albert Hall

Ah, so that's where the kangaroo comes in! Garsington Opera produces a souvenir mug each summer decorated with cartoons of that year's operas. Buy yours early enough, and you get a ceramic preview of the season – in the case of Gerald Barry's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a drawing of a kangaroo. True, Barry's operas are famously anarchic. But quite where a marsupial was supposed to fit into Oscar Wilde's comedy was unclear until halfway through Act One. Suddenly, there it was: fuzzy and large as life, lolloping dolefully across the stage.

Because? Well, because someone said 'Australia', silly. That's how it works. When Lady Bracknell (a mad-eyed Henry Waddington) mentions the French Revolution, Jack (Zahid Siddiqui) duly positions his head in a miniature guillotine while the butler (Peter Lidbetter) pelts him with cabbages from an on-stage kitchen. All the while, Barry's brutalist music motors straight ahead. Sometimes the brass get wheel-slip, and whirr and skid on the spot. Lidbetter destroys a restaurant's worth of crockery in strict tempo, and Barry never saw a piano without wanting to smash every key together at the same time.

Confronted with Barry's piledriver sonorities and time-bomb rhythms, the director Jack Furness hurls out surreal shards and sparks. Francis O'Connor's set is an adventure playground as imagined by Salvador Dali; a Looney-Tunes nightmare where pianos teeter on spindly giraffe legs, and Gwendolen's chaise-longue has been stretched and twisted into a helter-skelter of green liquorice. The centre of the stage is a patch of mud, and we've already mentioned the kangaroo. What, picnic time already?

When we return, Jack and Algernon (Sean Boylan) have roughed up the conductor, Douglas Boyd, and dumped him semi-conscious on the podium. The stage is now a war zone. Skippy's been lynched and Lady B – who is packing heat – has exchanged her grey power suit for a Prussian helmet and latex cape. You can guess what happens next. *The Importance of Being Earnest* happens, and the interesting thing is that however forcefully Barry dismembers Wilde's text – chanted, screamed, at times even sung (Jennifer France, as Cecily, gamely disrobes and delivers glass-shattering coloratura from her onstage bathtub) – the surtitles still seemed to get the biggest laughs.

No praise is high enough for Boyd's conducting and Furness's crazed but weirdly cogent stagecraft. Or for the commitment and skill of a cast who delivered Barry's nerve-shredding score while dodging pyrotechnics, rolling in mud and throwing themselves physically off stage. Good on Garsington for taking a punt on a new-ish opera (it's from 2011) and going all in. I've seen three of Barry's operas in the theatre (as against the concert hall) and I'm still not sure I understand what he's playing at, though he does seem to annoy all the right people. This was easily the most entertaining, and it's perfect for the country-house circuit because the final act works even better when the audience is blotto.

Meanwhile, the Proms are back and if Sakari Oramo's taut, brilliant performance of Mahler's Sixth didn't persuade me that this symphony is top-flight Mahler (tragic doesn't automatically mean better, folks) the curtain-raiser, Kurtag's *Stele*, showed the BBC Symphony Orchestra on peak form. Oramo's reading was simultaneously monumental and painfully intimate, and it managed the rare feat of making silence itself (deep, dark pools of the stuff) feel expressive.

But the concert of the week – currently odds-on to be the concert of the year (the Berlin Phil should look to its laurels) – came on Friday when John Wilson conducted his hand-picked Sinfonia of London in Respighi's *Roman Festivals*, *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*. Virtuoso orchestration goes supernova in these symphonic poems from the 1920s, and it was a safe bet that Wilson and the Sinfonia would hit the heights, supported by phalanxes of antiphonal brass and the Olympian thunder of the Albert Hall organ.

Still, that doesn't convey the full, life-affirming glory of these performances, or Wilson's ability to combine thrilling precision with the sense that every musician was playing from the heart. There's a boyish guilelessness about the way Wilson highlights favourite details (like the glinting piccolo melody in the 'Valle Giulia' section of *Fountains*) and just lets them speak. It never felt manipulated, or over-sold.

And how to describe the sensation – like an electrical current in the air – of a 60-piece string section playing prestissimo, and so softly that you can barely hear them over your own breath? Wilson is one of the supreme orchestra-trainers, and he clearly adores the results. The Sinfonia of London sounds as vital, and as overwhelming, as every orchestra sounded when you were 13 years old. You leave a concert like this feeling young again, and a little bit in love.

© COMPTON VERNEY, PHOTO BY JAMIE WOODLEY

Victorian chaise-longue upholstered in 'Fairy and stipple' pattern fabric, designed by Enid Marx, mid-20th century

Exhibitions

On your Marx...

Melanie McDonagh

The Pattern of Life: Enid Marx and Modern British Design
Compton Verney, Warwickshire,
until 3 January 2027

Enid Marx once pondered 'whether postage stamps are fine or industrial art. In my view the question rests on the quality of a design rather than its purpose. It is generally agreed, for example, that the work of Thomas Bewick is fine art, even when it is merely the engraving of a "trade card".' Marx was a textile designer, book illustrator, lino-cutter, wood-engraver, poster illustrator and, yes, postage-stamp designer ('The calling card of a nation', as she put it) and in all these things, the quality was unquestionable. Her unique, memorable designs were absorbed, unknowingly, by any number of people.

Her best-known work was the sturdy moquette fabric she designed for seats on London Underground in the 1930s. It was part of the vision of its director Frank Pick that nothing was too good for the passengers on public transport: 'Where the interests of the public are concerned, no detail is too trivial,' he observed. *O si sic omnes*. She also designed fabric for utility furniture after the war, for which she began by asking her daily help what she would like.

Marx was one of a golden generation, what Paul Nash called 'an outbreak of talent', at the Royal College of Art in the 1920s. Nash was one of her tutors. He had an enormous effect on Marx and her friends – contemporaries included Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

Many visitors to this exhibition will be itching to upholster a chaise-longue in the distinctive black and cream pattern on display here, or run up curtains in her curly 'Cornucopia' design. Me, I'm starting a campaign right here, right now, to persuade London Underground to refurbish its trains with the four designs they commissioned from her – the best known of which, 'Shield', was on seats for decades. Other visitors will come away humming with new enthusiasm for the English folk art that she and Margaret Lambert, her life companion, championed.

The curation is dire: hectoring, tone-deaf to the nuances of the period, endlessly interested in colonialism

Compton Verney, a stately home- turned-cultural centre in Warwickshire, is a worthy site for the exhibition, for Marx bequeathed it her and Lambert's collection after her death. It's an expansive display though some visitors may miss that the exhibition is divided between two spaces – more signage, please. It spans her career from the years at the Royal College of Art to her stamp design and her folk art.

The section given to her work in the war and just after shows a marvellous range of activity, from her engaging books for children – Bulgy the Barrage Balloon was an unlikely hero – her cheerful London Underground posters and the transformative Tube designs, which truculent manufacturers did their best to subvert. She was also a lively illustrator: we see her covers to Lambert's prescient book about the conflict in the Saar in 1931, their joint book on English folk art and the one she did for Charles Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust.

So the artefacts usefully reflect the sheer range of her work. The curation however, under Az Crawford, is dire: hectoring, tone-deaf to the nuances of the period, uninterested in important things (they don't address one obvious question: whether she was related to Karl, the answer to which is, yes, she was probably a distant cousin) but endlessly interested in cultural appropriation and colonalism. As for the catalogue, I've rarely seen such pleasing type and presentation squandered on such shoddy proof-reading and bad prose.

The panels include one on British primitivism: 'Enid Marx often looked to museum collections for research… including objects that had been acquired through unequal relations or taken from their original communities. We would now understand Marx's "borrowing" as a form of cultural appro-

priation' etc. Just as crass are the observations about sexuality whereby Marx and her mentors, life partners Dorothy Larcher and Phyllis Barron, apparently 'created textiles and furnishings that blurred rigid gender roles around delicate femininity to explore abstraction and pattern design… [A]bstraction and craft provided ways for queer women to express themselves while navigating the social pressures of the time.' This appears not to have occurred to Marx herself, who wasn't, in any case, forthcoming about her sexuality.

My advice to the visitor is to focus instead on the prints, the artefacts, the fabrics. When they come to life – as upholstery, wedding suits, bow ties, posters and books – they sing. Mind you, because Marx preferred natural dyes to synthetic, the colours of some fabric prints can seem drab – lots of brown.

Marx is still with us – Enid, not the other one. In the shop you can buy pieces with her patterns from Cambridge Imprint and tote bags in her star design. That just whets the appetite. I say the campaign to get Marx back on the seats of London Underground starts here.

Pop
Sweet nothings
Graeme Thomson

Charli XCX: Music, Film, Fashion
Atlantic Records

Of the three creative pursuits that give Charli XCX's eighth album its title, the English pop star seems least interested in the first. She admits as much on 'Camera', the best song on *Music, Fashion, Film*, which makes clear her obsession with acting and a desire to pursue it more fully. 'Do I want to make music?' she asks herself. 'Am I being fucking stupid if I try to be a girl on the screen and I'm turning 34?'

Even without this clue – which, like much of the album, is presented via the singer throwing out rhetorical spiel more or less unexpurgated – it is no great stretch to surmise that the pursuit of making music is struggling to fully hold her attention.

The follow-up to *Brat*, which made Charlotte Aitchison a global star in 2024 and instigated the entirely tiresome 'Brat summer' aesthetic, clocks in at a skimpy 30 minutes. A generous take is that the album was knocked out in the spirit of carefree spontaneity, perhaps in a conscious attempt to bypass the pressure of living up to such a huge hit. A less starry-eyed critique might conclude that it's all a bit will-this-do. Many tracks arrive half-formed and depart half-finished, as though we are hearing Charli in the first throes of creativity, working through vague ideas in real time rather than striving to present the finished thought or song. It's quite an interesting approach, conceptually, but ultimately scrappy and unsatisfying.

Only two songs here last longer than three minutes. On 'Card Declined', shopping is a proxy for an entire personality. 'I'll buy a smile/ …A whole back story/ Card declined'. Like many of the 11 tracks, it's a song with one idea – not a terrible one, admittedly – which very quickly runs out of steam. 'Rock Music', '2007', 'Yeah' and 'Persona' are barely here at all, built on the repetition of generic rock guitar riffs, glitchy rhythm and a handful of (consciously) trite phrases.

If Charli is getting a little bored with music, she at least remains fascinated by herself, as any good pop star should be. 'I keep thinking about you every single day and night,' she sings, the 'you' being the various lenses that reflect her image back at her and out into the world. Fame, identity, attention, self-perception, believing yourself simultaneously to be the worst and the best person in the room – these are all interesting subjects, but ones generally explored with surface-level enthusiasm.

'I'm not a bad girl anymore, I promise/ Wink, wink,' she sings on 'Wink, Wink', lest her recent marriage imply that she has settled into demure respectability, yet the rampant self-absorption lands as sweet rather than transgressive. Meanwhile, the offhand delivery and fourth wall-breaking asides – 'Just kidding, I'm only saying that for effect' – are mostly annoying, the zeitgeisty bon mots more crass than clever: 'I was hacked/ It was taken out of context, obviously/ But I didn't do it, even if I did.'

If Charli is getting a little bored with music, she at least remains fascinated by herself

Made with Charli's regular collaborators, A.G. Cook and Finn Keane, there is perhaps enough material on *Music, Fashion, Film* to pull together a decent EP. 'Magic Mental Montana' – a pulsing platonic love letter to Cook – is light and pleasing, while 'SS26' is pretty and low-key. 'Camera', borne along by an appealingly scratchy guitar riff, is funny, vulnerable and knowing, a combination Charli XCX gets right perhaps less often than she thinks. It comes wrapped up in a catchy chorus and a properly effective punchline: 'It's the only way to feel like I'm not actually me.'

The photograph on the album cover depicts John Cale, Marc Jacobs and Martin Scorsese posing in stark black and white. The intention – as with much of the album – seems provocative at first before dissolving into ambiguity. Perhaps Charli is paying sincere fealty to three (old, white, male) masters of their respective fields, while also inserting herself into the frame as a triple threat. Perhaps she is demanding respect by association (she has already collaborated very effectively with Cale). Who can say.

Another arty old dude, David Cronenberg, pops up on the bright, citrusy, electro-poppy closing track. On 'No One Lasts Forever', the 83-year-old movie director delivers a monologue about the ephemerality of art and artists in the face of mortality. *Music, Fashion, Film* makes the same case perhaps a little too effectively. It already feels almost instantly disposable.

Television
Joy ride
James Delingpole

Lucky
Apple TV

Ann Droid
BBC1

AI slop is not a new phenomenon. But it is becoming more prevalent as the lazy, the modish and the sub-literate take advantage of an apparently beneficial and cost-free leap in technology that will save them the time and effort formerly required to construct a speech, CV, article or image. I only started picking up on it myself quite recently. But now, when I get the feeling I'm being fed AI-generated pictures, I react like those dogs in the movies that are trained to spot Terminators.

Thanks to the proliferation of sites such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV etc. there's an awful lot of cable-TV slop about these days, as there has to be with all that space to fill, all those subscription costs to justify. And I'm not suggesting that it's all written by AI (though who knows). Just that it has that same effect where it tricks your brain into thinking, 'Hey, this really isn't bad', but your gut tells you, 'No, this is thin gruel pretending to be lobster bisque.'

Lucky is an all-too-typical example. It stars Anya Taylor-Joy as the ironically named Lucky, a woman on the run both from the police authorities and the criminal underworld, after a heist in which she is double-crossed by her husband. The police are represented by relentless, stern but big-hearted FBI agent Billie Rand (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), the crims headed by Annette Bening; while her only friend is her dad who is currently in prison but somehow free to advise her on what to do in frequent phone chats. So: decent cast, classic 'keep running, trust no one, and think on your feet' premise, but still, a waste of your time.

Why? Partly, I suppose, because we're back yet again in that deeply implausible 'You go, girl!' TV-drama cliché where a physically slight young woman is able continuously to overmatch big, hardened, professional killers. At the end of episode one she is tied up and chucked into the boot of the car by two such men and driven off to be imprisoned or executed.

But it's OK, don't worry, Anya Taylor-Joy has got it. How? Well, at the risk of spoiling your surprise, she burns through her bonds with a Zippo lighter, then finds some of the emergency rocket flares people always carry in their cars, sneaks through the hole leading to the rear passenger seat while the baddies are distracted with loud heavy metal music and… Need I go on?

Normally one of the joys of the on-the-run genre – from *The Thirty-Nine Steps* to *Three Days of the Condor* – is the protagonist's ingenuity in keeping one step ahead of his pursuers. Here, it's barely necessary. The delivery guy helps her escape in his van because he's nice and he's been through hard times himself; the FBI agent who is just about to arrest her at gunpoint gets flattened by the gangsters' car. Easy. Too easy. Almost like entertainment, but not entertainment.

Ann Droid, meanwhile, is almost like a decent sitcom. The situation is promising: ageing widow Sue gets palmed off by the son who used to look after her with a clapped-out, refurbished model of one of those human-like elder-care robots that are all the rage in this futuristic world we inhabit. What they forgot to include, unfortunately, was quite enough of the comedy element.

Perhaps one should have expected this since it stars Diane Morgan from the BBC's agonisingly unfunny spoof-interview series with Philomena Cunk. But actually she's really good in this, and moves exactly like a slightly inept, outdated elder-care robot would – so much so that you find her endearing. All the characters are great, in fact. Strongly differentiated, eccentrically likeable and well acted, by an excellent cast including Sue Johnston as Sue, Michelle Greenidge as Jamaican nurse Briana, Kathryn Hunter as down to earth friend Eileen and so on. You really could get to enjoy these people's company, so I shouldn't be surprised if it proved a success with its oldster target audience.

But therein also lies its flaw. It's so busy being sensitive and moving and poignant about senescence, loneliness, death and loss that it doesn't dare go in hard enough on the jokes, which really could do with being sicker and darker. Still, I did enjoy the one about the feckless son Michael, who is covered in blotches after participating in a drugs trial for easy cash. 'If it was dangerous,' he says, 'do you really think drug companies would do it?'

Theatre

Living the high life

Lloyd Evans

Trainspotting – the musical
Theatre Royal, Haymarket, until 5 September, and touring until 20 March 2027

Hit Machine
Soho Theatre, until 15 August

Plenty of critics have mocked *Trainspotting – the musical* (with lyrics and music by Irvine Welsh and Stephen McGuinness, respectively) but the producers know their audience's mind. They want to see live theatre without taking the risk of a new play, which might be gruesome, and they prefer a dead-safe replica of a glamorous movie to something by Chekhov or Pinter. Reviewers admire novelty and inventiveness so they tend to punish theatre-makers who reheat leftovers. The show follows the book more closely than the film, where Renton was the central figure, and here he blends in with the community of wasters and criminals who mope around Edinburgh trying to raise cash for smack.

The characters are reduced to simplistic gestures, as easy to read as hand signals. Begbie is a cocky thug. Spud is a twitchy clown. Sick Boy is a handsome nobody. Renton, smirking throughout, is a star looking for a clear night to shine in. The women are even less appealing. The young girlfriends are shrieking pests and the older ladies are fretful gossips and scolds.

The show meanders along with no suspense at all because Renton announces in his opening speech that his destiny is to swap Class-A drugs for suburban nihilism. Perhaps he should have kept that to himself. The narrative coalesces into a slogan only once: 'Heroin loves misery and misery loves company,' says Renton, and he repeats it later, in case you weren't listening. Maybe you weren't.

The production would work well on a cruise ship or in a night club with waiters weaving between the tables and serving cocktails to viewers chatting among themselves while keeping half an eye on the stage. No shame in that. The songs are a disorganised array of angry punk anthems and electronic disco tunes. Every half hour, a classic hit pops up. 'Bitter Sweet Symphony' or 'Perfect Day'. The cast should make a bigger effort to get the crowd singing along.

At the start of Act Two, all the actors trot on to the stage in cowboy costumes and perform a country-and-western number. No irony is intended. The song is meant to inject the second half with zest and merriment.

After its West End run, the show embarks on a national tour, and the design is well suited to life on the road. The cheap costumes don't need folding or ironing. There's little furniture on stage, just a few lightweight chairs that Begbie throws around when he gets cross. The rear walls are lit up with video projections, which are much cheaper than painted flats but they make the production feel flashy and impermanent, like a catwalk show. This corny version is nowhere near as good as the film but it may get you out of the house.

Hit Machine at Soho Theatre shows signs of greatness. It follows the rivalry between two songwriters, one rich and successful, the other highly talented but ill disciplined. They're also siblings. Wes has made millions from the music industry and he receives a visit from his impoverished brother Alex, who wants to restart his career. Earlier in life, Alex passed up the chance to earn a fortune in royalties because he prized his artistic purity. Now he regrets it. 'I want to sell out,' he cries. 'But I don't know how to.'

The brothers improvise a hit in Wes's sitting room, adding layers of sound with a computer, and making up the lyrics as they go along. A play about music that places the act of creation on stage is nothing new. But

This corny version is nowhere near as good as the film but it may get you out of the house

it's still riveting. While they work, the brothers make bitchy comments about pop stars and they do impersonations of Adele, Ed Sheeran and Tracy Chapman. Wes dismisses Adele's work with a single word. 'Earnest'. This is not inaccurate.

The scene changes as a new rap star, Defy the Leader, swans into the house and asks Wes to give him a hit for his next album. Will Wes use the new joint composition or will he edge his brother out of the action? The scene is tensely hilarious because Wes has to fawn over Defy the Leader, whom he barely knows, and Alex is painfully aware that Wes's deferential manner is all an act.

The dark, creepy relationship between the three creatives has a lot of potential. But the writer, Jonathan Caren, fails to pursue the journey. Then what? The show runs out of ideas. Wes and Alex weep over their troubled childhood and not much else happens. The play ends with a rap solo that lacks drama.

Very disappointing. The first 60 minutes are golden. Josh Radnor (Wes) is a great foil to Noah Galvin whose nervy, self-lacerating and adorable Alex is the highlight of the production. This show could go somewhere interesting but it needs a stronger chassis and better fuel.

NOTES ON...

Plastic plants

By *Ella Veakins*

Monstera deliciosa, otherwise known as the Swiss cheese plant, is perhaps the most popular houseplant of them all, probably because it's so easy to care for. In normal circumstances, you almost have to try to mess it up. A heatwave, however, akin to those we've become used to this summer, can put a *monstera* under stress. Subject one to anything more than 30°C for too long and you'll find its poor leaves scorched, its roots damaged and its stems desperately dehydrated.

For this reason, there might be the temptation to turn to a shockingly popular alternative: the plastic plant. It should be resisted at all costs.

A potted history takes us back to the 1950s, when a postwar manufacturing boom saw the mass production of cheap polyvinyl chloride and polyethylene. And so it was that unkillable leaves of various garish, greenish shades were first fashioned from plastic, fixed to a stem and placed on innocent tabletops.

Over time, plastic plants took on sillier features, with polyester used for fake petals throughout the 1970s. By the 2000s, latex was included to imitate the exact waxy feel of the real deal. The tide of eco-consciousness across the 2010s and 2020s brought a

range of recycled plastics and biodegradable polymers into the mix. You can now purchase just about any kind of fake houseplant ('hassle-free décor', as Amazon puts it), as tropical as possible and as rare as you like, straight off some sweatshop-fuelled e-commerce platform for a grand total of around £2 and not too many pence.

The only issue is that they are absolutely ghastly. Radiohead were on the mark with their 1995 single 'Fake Plastic Trees', which was written, in part, to condemn the newly built and nauseatingly synthetic landscape of Canary Wharf. 'Her green plastic watering can/ For a fake Chinese rubber plant', the song begins, before going on to declare: 'It wears her out/ It wears her out/ It wears her out/ It wears her out.'

It sure does wear me out. However advanced modern manufacturing becomes, and however hard manufacturers try, these monstrosities are not *monsteras*. Not even slightly. Their presence creates a strange atmosphere of unease. Spying a plastic plant in the corner of a room is a surefire way to suck the life out of your surroundings. As if that isn't happening enough already. Now that AI is replacing so much writing, thinking and creating, we don't need fake plants to pair with our fake humans.

Plus, there is a good scientific reason to embrace real greenery. The human eye is more sensitive to green wavelengths than to any other part of the visible spectrum. We can distinguish subtle variations in the colour with remarkable precision. This evolutionary advantage probably helped our ancestors identify healthy vegetation and sources of food in their forest surroundings. It is a colour with which we remain instinctively at ease. So natural green, with all its variation and changeability, is something artificial materials simply cannot replicate.

Numerous studies have also associated exposure to natural greenery with lower stress levels and reduced heart rates. And even if you think all that is a load of wellness woo-woo, there's still no getting around the fact that a plastic plant is just ugly. You'd be far better off with no plant at all.

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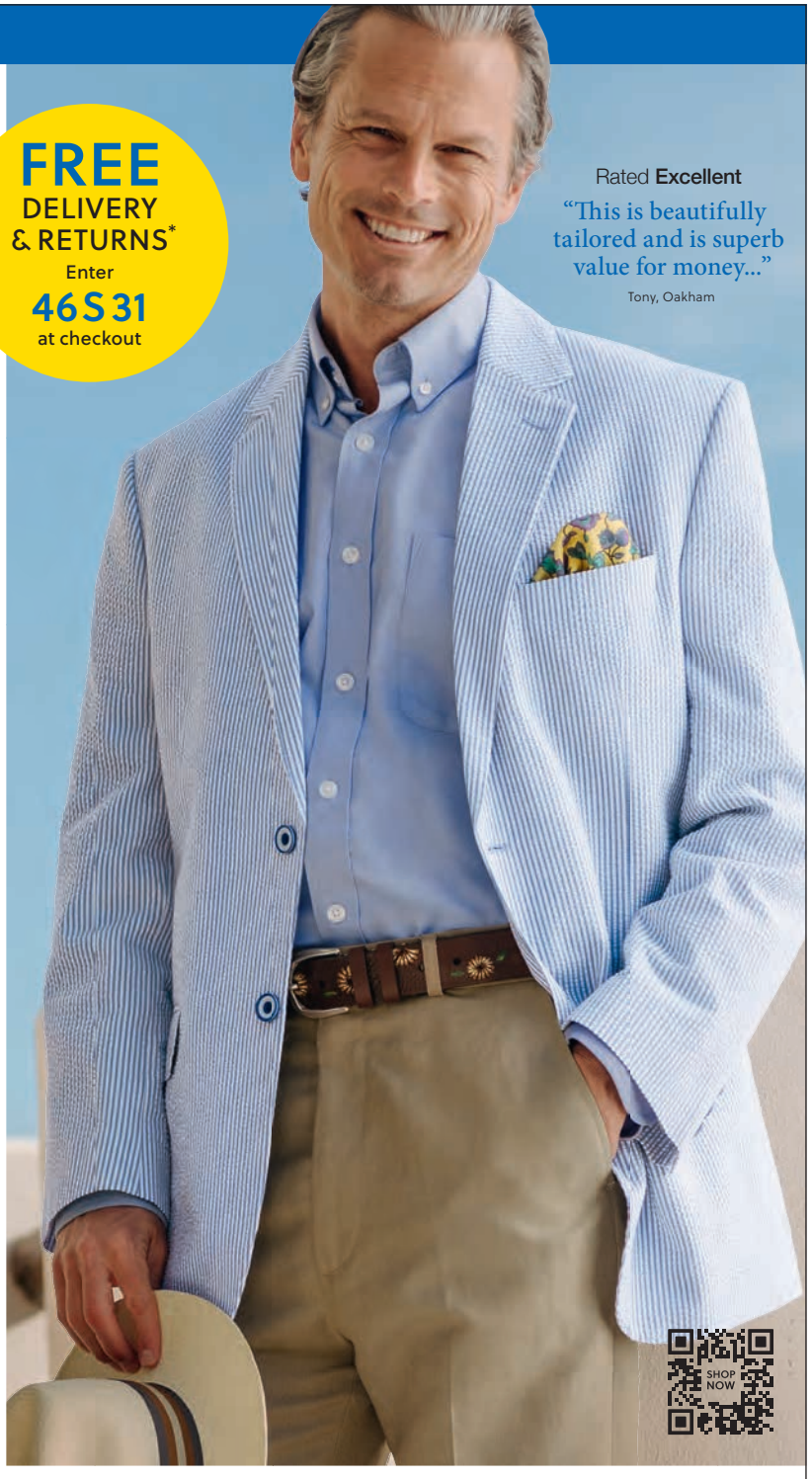

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Journalists are no longer contented, well-watered members of the Establishment but bitter, over-educated people who made a really bad career choice in the early 2000s.
— ***Rory Sutherland, p61***

LIFE

No life
Lloyd Evans

'Altogether Elsewhere.' The title page of an unpublished travel book caught my eye during a recent clear-out. The author, Matthew Leeming, was a character who deserved to be famous but somehow never made it. He was imaginative, witty, fearless and greedy – wonderfully greedy. He inherited his father's ceramics company and ran it for years with great success. He loved being rich. 'Money,' he used to say wistfully, 'eases the pain of being alive.'

He invented businesses out of thin air. In Oxford he lived in a neighbourhood called St Clement's and he created a summer school by printing a ream of luxury notepaper with an imposing letterhead: 'St Clement's College, St Clement's, Oxford.' He hired a lecture room and gave English lessons to German teenagers who doubtless imagined

To pique women's interest, he claimed to be off-limits. 'I'm training for the Catholic priesthood,' he confided

that they were enrolled at Oxford University. He made a tidy sum and no one complained. Aged 21, he organised a four-man motorbike expedition to China along the silk road. Having led the party to Istanbul, he withdrew while his companions continued eastward across Asia but were halted at the India-China border. The trip was over. Back in London, Leeming prised open the frontier by depositing $20,000 in cash at the Chinese embassy. Or so he alleged.

In 1988, I shared a flat with him in Brixton but he left abruptly after being attacked in the street by two old acquaintances who claimed that he owed them money. 'If you live in the slums, the slums bite back,' he said as he carried his boxes of books, including his treasured biographies of Robert Byron and Wilfred Thesiger, into the boot of his BMW 5 Series. Next Afghanistan, where he sought new tile designs and technical know-how for his ceramics firm.

During his first flight to Kabul, he was approached by a friendly Englishman who offered him a few survival tips: 'Kandahar? It's infested with bandits. Herat? Russian landmines everywhere. Helmand? They behead Europeans on sight. Nangarhar? You'll be sold as a sex slave to the Uzbeks.' Leeming realised that his new friend had a proprietorial interest in Afghanistan and wished to scare off potential rivals.

Leeming's sex life was a disappointment to all concerned – especially himself. He was a confident, popular figure at parties and had a tall, elegant physique with brown swept-back hair. In poorly lit rooms he was occasionally mistaken for Jeremy Irons. But women resisted his charms. To pique their interest, he claimed to be off-limits. 'I'm training for the Catholic priesthood,' he confided to attractive females at parties without realising that his pose of celibacy made him seem weird or gay (or both). He invested in a Jaguar XJS and dropped hints about his luxury toy, but the tactic came across as needy rather than debonair. He remained convinced that the Jag was an aphrodisiac. I once arrived at a champagne party in Chelsea and found him leading, or perhaps dragging, a startled blonde towards the window. 'It's the green one,' he said, pointing into the street, 'between the Merc and the Audi.'

In Afghanistan he hit the jackpot. Having joined a secretive oil cartel, he became the chief supplier of aviation fuel to Nato's International Security Assistance Force. He'd made it. He moved to Dubai where he lived like a king. An email arrived. 'Hi Lloyd. Our firm needs to be rebranded. Come up with a catchy name and I'll buy you a Rolls-Royce.' I thought for a few seconds and replied: 'How about "Bombs Away" or "Hard Rain"?' No answer from Leeming. Shortly after this, his fortunes began to sink and he lost his position in the cartel as well as his remaining businesses, which included a start-up in Hampshire backed by friends who each owned a £5,000 share.

A manuscript arrived through the post. 'Altogether Elsewhere.' A bracingly funny and candid account of his life in Afghanistan, including his accidental involvement in the assassination of the warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud. A literary agent liked the first draft. A contract was in the air. 'Leeming's got a book deal,' I told a mutual friend who worked in publishing. 'He'll never finish it,' said the friend instantly, and without malice. He was right.

Leeming spent his last years near his hometown of Winchester where he enjoyed the support of his inner circle. I avoided his calls because I knew what to expect. He

At his funeral, the eulogy was delivered by Boris. 'Anyone here owed money by Leeming?' he said

would order a pub lunch and telephone an unsuspecting well-wisher. 'I'm so glad I caught you,' he would say affably. 'I popped into the Earl of Cumberland for a pint and they've offered me half a roast duck with a punnet of pan-fried chips and an avocado salad. But my credit card is playing up. The staff are being difficult. Could you transfer 30 quid to cover it?'

At his funeral, the eulogy was delivered by Boris. 'Anyone here owed money by Leeming?' he said. 'Hands up. I'm told there are quite a few.' My paw twitched involuntarily but I kept it down. Poor Leeming. And poor me. I'll never see that five grand again. In life he was a failure, but he was also, indubitably, a star. It's strange how that happens.

Dog's life
Sophia Money-Coutts

Dennis refuses to step on to the scales at the vet. Perhaps he's nervous about his holiday weight. The upshot is that I have to climb on the scales holding him, and then again without him, so the receptionist can work out the difference. It makes for quite a humiliating morning, shouting my weight across a

crowded veterinary waiting room. A woman clutching an elderly cat looks determinedly at the floor.

It's our third trip to the vet in a week. Grass seed season is particularly bad this year, they say, on account of the heat, which has turned the seeds brittle and more likely to penetrate paws and ears. Local councils and their obsession with rewilding is also to blame, chunter some dog owners, since they've used this fashionable eco policy as an excuse not to mow. A few days earlier, Dennis had developed a swollen, weeping toe and a limp, and people tell you such horror stories about grass seeds worming their way from paws into internal organs and sprouting that I drove to the vet like Evel Knievel.

I emailed to explain that I sadly couldn't attend that evening's premiere because my dog was too doped up

The first vet said it wasn't a grass seed and advised salt baths. We returned after the weekend because the toe was still weeping, and the following day yet again so Dennis could be sedated and another vet could rootle around and fish the thing out.

No grass seed, it transpired, after this third trip. Perhaps a bite or a nail infection. We headed home with a strip of antibiotics, and I emailed Jilly Cooper's literary agent, Felicity Blunt, to explain that I sadly couldn't attend that evening's Audible premiere of a short story by the late writer because my dog was too doped up. Jilly, I feel, would have understood.

Back we went a couple of days after that, visit number four, because I needed to pick up his tapeworm treatment. Dennis dug his toes into the pavement outside. Fair enough. Fortunately he's insured (although the premium has just gone up again) because otherwise the whole ordeal would have cost £785.17.

'Why are our vets so expensive?' mused my friend Julia, on a dog walk in Dulwich woods later that week. Her mother lives in Spain, where she says an appointment and a jab or treatment of some sort may only set her back around €70-80, short of the hundreds that it may cost in the UK.

Good question. As it happens, our many recent expeditions to the vet coincided with the publishing of a government white paper on the industry, which is being heralded as the biggest shake-up of the veterinary sector in 60 years. Among various suggestions, it calls for vets to publish their price lists online, for caps to be imposed on prescription fees and for practices more clearly to disclose whether they're kindly, independent, James Herriot-type places, or simply money-grubbing outlets that form part of a corporate chain.

Just over a decade ago, as the white paper points out, those sticky fingers in private equity started poking about in the veterinary industry. In 2013, around 90 per cent of British vet practices were independent. Now, the majority are owned by six corporate groups. Guess what? Prices have shot up, more than doubling since 2016.

A host of other problems have conspired to worsen the situation, says Dr Caroline Allen, former chief vet for the RSPCA, who's recently set up a consultancy, Pet Lighthouse, partly for those with elderly or sick animals who simply don't know who to trust. Corporatisation hasn't helped her profession, she tells me, but the pandemic puppy boom piled pressure on vets, and we Brits are much soppier than our European counterparts: 'We're just ahead with this whole, "dogs are a member of our family" thing.' As a result, she says, we seek ever more sophisticated and expensive treatments for our pets and can't bear to let them go when the time comes. The debate about assisted dying regarding humans may be one thing, but euthanasia regarding animals 'is increasingly seen as a failure'.

Some years ago, a dog owner might have realised that a dog was coming to the end of its life, decided they'd had a good innings and it was time to put them to sleep. 'Now, they may have a tumour, but they can be referred to an oncologist, they can do radiation, they can keep that dog going for another six months to a year. It may cost £10,000, but the attitude is it's worth it.' Don't bash the vets, Allen adds, they're doing the best they can in trying circumstances. Shockingly, the suicide rate among vets in the UK is four times the national average. Perhaps some of our sympathy for NHS staff could be shared.

Touch wood, the final decision is a few years off for Dennis (aged two). Although yesterday I discovered that he'd chewed the plastic eyes off a small toy sheep and swallowed them. 'We're sorry to hear that Dennis has been poorly,' came a message from the insurers that afternoon, shortly before another confirming that they'd approved my claim. Hang on, I nearly wrote back, frowning at the poor, blind sheep, there may soon be another one.

In the meantime, mind how you go with that grass seed.

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Still life

Catriona Olding

Provence

As soon as I opened my front door I could smell it. Along the path, flakes of white ash landed on my arms. Looking north beyond the cliff, I saw a rapidly increasing plume of brown-black smoke. Before long it filled a third of the sky. Not again. Ten years ago, almost to the day, the concrete shack I was renting in the woods a few miles from the village was almost engulfed. Jeremy was having a break and staying with me when a wildfire broke out in the valley below. The smoke and flames looked about a quarter of a mile away and firefighting Canadairs flew low overhead. Friends told us to leave but I refused. I'd left everything behind in Scotland 18 months before and couldn't face doing so again. Jeremy asked if he'd have to knock me out and throw me over his shoulder. I threw him a look, heated up some *soupe au pistou* and then sat weeping on the terrace sipping the large gin he'd poured me. But after the wind changed and the smoke and flames headed back towards us, we left, and the house survived.

By evening the smoke was much worse. I knew I would be safe here in the cave, but I help rent out a house ten minutes' walk away near the forest, and on Saturday had let a young couple in. She was pregnant and although we'd been texting I thought I should go and see how they were. I took the long way round, heading up to the top of the hill to get a better view. There I could

see the smoke was coming from the direction of St Joseph, the monastery where our young Mater Dei nuns are based. St Joseph is connected to the Sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Grâces by a forest track. From the wind direction it seemed that both sites were in danger.

Further down and round the corner the smoke, made orange by the sinking sun, filled the sky. Canadairs came low over my head in formation. I ran to the renters' place and, finding the gate locked, called them. They'd left already. But American Cathy is here and her house was also in the path of the flames. I rang her, told her to come to mine, and hurried home. Having worked hard all her life as a doctor and psychiatrist, she's had a terrible year of divorce and – like me – lost almost everything. Her house and friends here are her consolation. Half an hour later there was still no sign of her. No answer to my calls or messages either. 'If you don't answer I'm coming to get you.' She didn't. It was getting dark.

At the bend in the road, looking back, I could see a massive bank of flames rise behind the hill. The Canadairs had stopped for the night, but the road was busy as dozens of fire trucks, sirens blaring, careered down the hill. When I rounded the corner of Cathy's steep drive I saw we were in trouble. The huge hillside 200 yards or so east was ablaze; the heat, a vast wall of it, was intense, and the air was filled with dense smoke and the roar of tens of thousands of burning trees. Domestic gas bottles exploded close by. Like some Provençal Heathcliff, I shouted over and over for Cathy, and found her sobbing in the hall. 'Come on, get in your car, I'll close the upstairs shutters.' 'I can't, I need to find my laptop and phone.' 'Your car is packed. They'll be in there. Go and look.'

I ran upstairs. From the open bedroom windows the fire was closer still. It was so hot I had to turn away. The last window

The road was busy as dozens of fire trucks, sirens blaring, careered down the hill

wouldn't open. Panic rose. For a moment my body didn't know whether to faint or throw up. Giving up on the shutter, I ran downstairs and locked the front door. Cathy had found her phone but was still crying, looking for her laptop. 'Look, there it is. Go to mine now. Be calm and careful. I'll follow.' 'I can… I can do that. I'm a doctor. I've seen terrible things.' Her face cleared and she set off.

Later, at about 11 p.m., on my terrace sipping local Carpe Diem rosé, we counted 90 fire trucks coming down the hill. Cathy wanted my neighbour Geoffrey to join us and messaged him. A few minutes later, a look of horror. 'I texted the wrong Geoffrey! I texted my 19-year-old patient instead.' 'What did you say?' 'I said, "If you're still up, please come over."' 'That's you struck off.'

Next morning I left Cathy sleeping and went to check her house. Near the garage smoke-blackened pompiers leant against their trucks glugging bottles of water. Feeling suddenly overcome and tearful, I waved. A pompier hose lay abandoned on Cathy's terrace. They'd saved the house. But the garden was burnt to within inches of the living-room wall and was still smouldering. Later, American Cathy, English Cathy, Colonel Peter and I spent hours trying to put the embers out with buckets of pool water, but it wasn't until a fire engine arrived that it was fully extinguished. Filthy and bloodied by burnt undergrowth we said our goodbyes, promising to reconvene over drinks later. The monastery and sanctuary were both saved.

Fast life

Tanya Gold

The Ford Capri is a paradigm of self-deception, but cars are men's mirrors, and they want to be deceived by them. Thanks to *The Professionals* (1977-83), in which Bodie and Doyle of Criminal Intelligence drove a silver Capri and a gold Capri, almost two million were sold. Even the police used them, which is absurd. They only had two doors. Even so, I'd like to see a villain stuffed into a fastback coupé, ideally through the window.

I like the old Capri because there was something jaded and stubborn about it: a weary postwar British sex appeal. It was our version of the Ford Mustang, produced from 1969 to 1986. Then we bickered over the obituary because everything is about class: Del Boy of *Only Fools and Horses* had one too, in the shade of green that usually means clinical infection.

'Is it,' the BBC asked with reliable snobbery in *The Car's the Star*, 'a classic car or a sleazy run-around for ageing wide boys?' Can't it be both – since it is both?

Though the Capri was replaced by the Ford Probe and the Ford Cougar, whose double entendres I swallow while choking, we moved on to calmer cars: the Escort and the Fiesta. The names were prayers. If we hoped for a fiesta with an escort, we didn't get one. We got Thatcherism.

But its owners couldn't forget the Capri, named for the island off Naples, though the old Capri had no ghostly hebephiles: I will leave the question 'Would the Emperor Tiberius have driven a Capri?' for another day. (Ferrari and Fiat would say not.) They couldn't forget how it made them feel because they were 50 years younger then, and their bodies sometimes worked. I met a group of Capri owners last month and I watched their ancient faces reflected in the paintwork. They are furious because Ford reanimated the Capri name in 2024 and attached it to a mid-size electric SUV.

Is it a metaphor? Is it – woke? How could Ford do this to the Capri, they muttered, which means: how could they do this to me? I didn't want to tell them that pressed steel can't feel pain; that they have confused the Capri with themselves. The Capri was the best car ever, they said. Except it wasn't. The new Capri is better. But I am not a man who nearly had a threesome in 1973 and can't forget.

Sweep away the old Capri, Criminal Intelligence, the Essex V4 engine – made in Dagenham, whose Ford sign was the largest neon object in Europe! – and Doyle's hair. The new Capri is an SUV, which exists for people who fear being run over, which is everyone. This is a fearful age with a fearful chassis, and people shout their fear with growing size, like birds. Sometimes I think everyone has a mid-size SUV now, like a hundred people singing 'Memory' from *Cats* in a car park.

I like the new Capri, but I like Fords very much: the Mustang is the best sports-car under £60,000 that I have driven, and for that you get immaculate throb. The Capri is boxy with a pleasing face: it is still stylish. There is a jauntiness to it. If it's a cliché that Americans do optimism better than the British, it is also true: I can't imagine Mini having the biggest neon sign in Europe.

Forget the throb too: electric cars don't vibrate. You grip hard and race to 62mph in six seconds while wondering if the car is controlled by China. Then you remind yourself you are in a mid-size SUV, and isn't this amazing? There is information on the dashboard and screen which is very soothing, as if you have a robot friend. It makes driving feel effortless, which suits me well. It won't evoke the threesome you nearly had in 1973. I don't mind that.

There are dozens of mid-size SUVs, but this one made me feel happy, which is what new cars are for. Self-acceptance through the application of money. Men on the estate above Penzance look at it, and note the name Capri, and they don't seem to hate it. Rather, it incites a curiousness in them as if the name, like any familiar scent, evokes a terrible nostalgia.

Perhaps Ford is right, and those who feel betrayed by the newly sensible Capri will follow their classic cars to the graveyard, and the new Capri will be the famous Capri. It starts at £42,075; its top speed is 111mph; it has a theoretical range of 346 miles, and if it could speak – and one day it will – it would say: I am Mrs de Winter now.

Chess
Confidence
Luke McShane

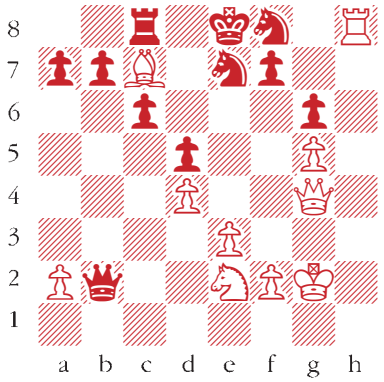
Gukesh Dommaraju, the 20-year-old world champion from India, is in crisis. Since winning the title by defeating Ding Liren in 2024, he has suffered a catastrophic slump in form. His latest setback, at the Quantbox Chennai Grand Masters tournament, saw him finish in clear last place, just as he did at the elite Norway Chess event in June.

Gukesh will defend his title in a match which is provisionally scheduled to begin in November. He has plummeted to 30th place on the live rating list, barely above the symbolic 2700 level. His Uzbek challenger Javokhir Sindarov currently sits at fourth place, making him a clear favourite.

Some time ago, comparing the strengths of the top Indian players, the renowned Indian coach RB Ramesh identified Gukesh's main strength as his 'insane self-belief'. That accords with my own experience facing Gukesh in a tense game at the London Chess Classic in 2023. During our brief postmortem chat he showed no arrogance at all, but evinced the quiet conviction that he would win somehow (as indeed he did).

Confidence is a boon to any player, so its presence or absence can create a virtuous or vicious circle. Gukesh's recent games have been painful to watch, giving the impression of a player who can do nothing right. Two losses in Chennai even came from excellent positions. In the position below, strongest was 29 Bf4!, followed by Ne2-g3 and then Bf4-d6 or Bf4-e5-g7. There is little Black can do to oppose these ideas.

Diag 1: White to play, position after 28…Rd8-c8



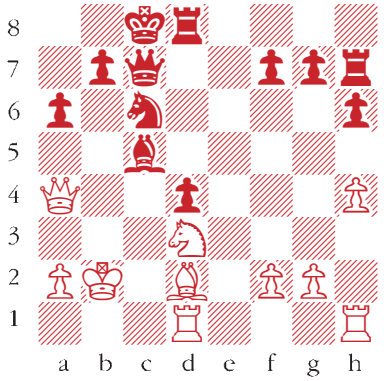
Gukesh Dommaraju–Arjun Erigasi
Chennai Grand Masters, July 2026
(see diagram 1)

29 Be5? Nf5! Now 30 Ng3?? loses to Nxe3+ **30 Bg7 Ke7 31 Bf6+ Kd6** A cheeky defence, but the king is remarkably safe here. **32 Be5+ Ke7 33 Bf6+ Kd6 34 Bg7 Ke7 35 e4 Nxg7 36 Qxc8 Nge6** The position is balanced, and Gukesh lost his way in the complications. After 63 moves, **White resigns**.

When it rains, it pours. The next day, Gukesh built up a two-pawn advantage, but managed to lose yet again.

M. Pranesh–Gukesh Dommaraju
Chennai Grand Masters, July 2026

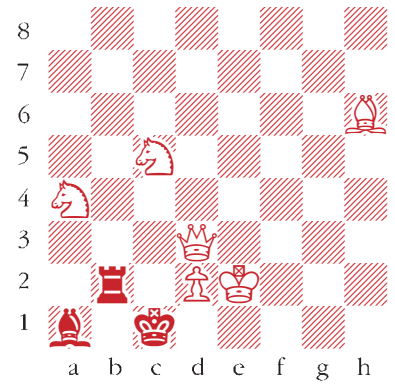
Black to play, position after 25 Nf4-d3



25...Rd5? 25…Bd6! was best, followed by Kc8-b8-a8 and Rh7-h8 to tidy up. With care, Black should win. **26 Qc4 Qd6 27 Bf4 Ba3+ 28 Ka1 Qd7 29 Rb1** Already, Black must tread carefully. Best was 29…Rh8 30 Rb6 Rb5 but White's game remains easier. **b5?** A fatal weakening. **30 Qb3 b4 31 Qc4 Kd8** Now everything just collapses. 31…Kb7 32 Nc5+ Rxc5 33 Qxc5 was the last chance. **32 Nc5 Qf5 33 Nb7+ Kd7 34 g4! Qe4 35 Rhe1 Qf3 36 Rb3 Qxf4 37 Qxd5+ Kc7 38 Rf3 Bb2+ 39 Kb1 Black resigns**

PUZZLE NO. 910

White to play and mate in two moves. Composed by Philip Hamilton Williams, *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 1901. Email answers (first move only) to **chess@spectator.co.uk** by Monday 3 August. There is a prize of a £20 John Lewis voucher for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.



Last week's solution 1 Ba8!, e.g. 1…Kxa8 2 Qc8# or 1…Nc6 2 Qb7# or 1…Nc7 2 Qd8#
Last week's winner Peter Clarridge, Swanley, Kent

Competition
As you liken it
Lucy Vickery

For Competition 3460 you were invited to write a sonnet beginning 'Shall I compare thee to a [trisyllable of your choice]'.

This challenge, which called for a twist on Sonnet 18, produced objects of comparison that ranged far and wide from bacon rolls to a simile. It was a popular competition, eliciting stellar performances all round; I was sorry not to have space for Helene Parry, David Silverman and Paul Freeman.

The seven best are printed below and earn their authors a £25 John Lewis voucher apiece.

Shall I compare thee to a tennis ball?
I'm moved betimes to give thee quite a whack
and yet it seems thou dost not care at all,
like summer's lease thou keep'st on bouncing back.
Yet sometimes, when I need thy comfort most
I feel an absence when the call is 'out!'
forsooth, it seemed you almost hit the post
and Hawk-eye's there to rule out any doubt.
At times I'd drop thee, do it like a shot,
beneath my breath I murmur 'What the deuce?'
thou'd strive, I fear, to take advantage, plot
to score, with rough winds playing fast and loose.
Time passes; hear the warning from above
and list to me, whatever ere befalls
it seems that thou art nearing forty love,
'tis time to join the legion of dead balls.
Sylvia Fairley

Shall I compare thee to a flag, half-mast,
That flaps and flutters as the wind decides,
Or to a hope once bright, that now fades fast
Like flotsam floating off on ebbing tides?
You swore you'd lead us to the Promised Land
Where, filled with milk and honey to excess,
You'd toast us, with a pint glass in your hand,
As people freed from poverty and stress.
Meanwhile, from dubious sources, so we're told,
Bestowed by felons not to be admired,
You lined your pockets with ill-gotten gold
While claiming it was honestly acquired.
But soon, as an oasis offering drink
Turns out to be no more than a mirage,
You, with your so-called honest gains, might sink
Like Ozymandias in the sand, Farage!
Alan Millard

Shall I compare thee to a pop-up tent?
Thou art as lightweight, cheap and staunch in gusts,
I wrestle with thee, then, all patience spent,
I call thee rubbish, say thy size disgusts,
Sometimes thou leak, and smell of sweaty feet,
Thou cast thy shade, and suffer much from wind,
Thy durability cannot compete
With camper vans; some folk would see thee binned,
Yet thy low-tech enchantments have their charms,
Though often wet, you are quick-drying too,
My dearest home at festivals and farms,
My shelter, lacking little but a loo,
Therefore I'll sleep within thy snug embrace,
And pray thou won't collapse upon my face.
Janine Beacham

Shall I compare thee to a virgin queen?
Thy will prevails and well thou know'st thy will.
Whatever others will thou art serene
And so remain a willing virgin still.
But time will wither the unplanted seed
And maids, like wives and harlots, turn to dust.
To her who bears no infant to succeed
The offspring of a foreign cousin must.
If you can love me let us live and love
And share our woes by day and joys by night.
And if you seek approval from above
A priest will do the necessary rite.
But if you cannot love me love another
And be a better lover's children's mother.
Philip Roe

Shall I compare thee to a G and T?
Cool in thy glass with lime and melting ice
In this great heat thou art the drink for me,
Going fast down: a second would be nice.
That hint of quinine, medicine in a drink,
A lovely quaff of tonic, ice and gin
With floating rounds of lime. I truly think
A third elixir could not be a sin.
It makes me happy, sexy, light and bright.
The bottle's still half full. A shame to waste
Something that gives such joy. Perhaps I might
Enjoy a fourth … a fifth… well … jusht a tashte.
Who says I'm pissht, and plashtered, shpeaking
shlurred,
Giggling and gabbling nonshenshe, thatsh abshurd!
Shirley Curran

Shall I compare thee to a [fill in gap]?
Well, certainly not to a summer's day!
Those far-fetched images are always crap.
Old Shakespeare often twists them anyway.
And furthermore, since when are you called 'thee'?
I might be getting on, but I was not
Born sometime in the sixteenth century.
If I said that, you'd think I'd lost the plot.
Praising you with a sonnet's hard enough
And so I'd rather keep the language plain,
And also leave out all that 'thou art' stuff.
In case you think I've really gone insane.
You know exactly what you mean to me
Without a metaphor or simile.
Brian Murdoch

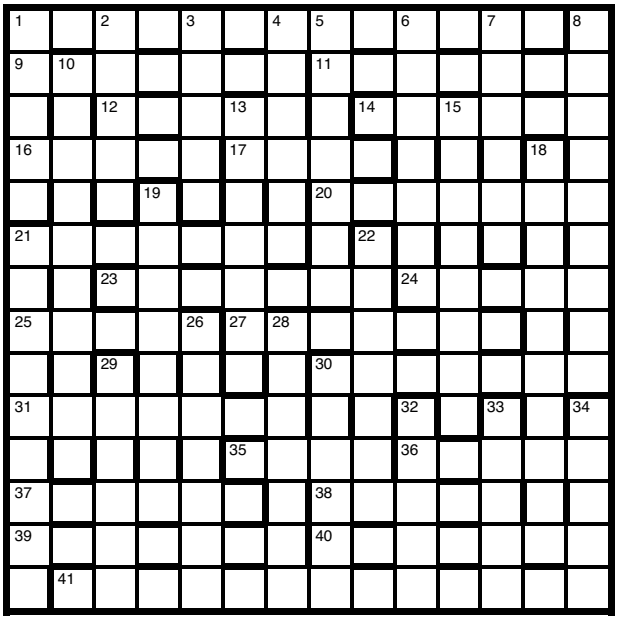
Shall I compare thee to a President?
Your puffy orange face, your yellow hair;
The famed White House where you are resident
Now half-destroyed because you had to tear
The East Wing down to feed your vanity
And build a massive ballroom in its place;
Dementia, verging on insanity,
Though no one dares to tell you to your face.
Your thirty-four convictions, all for fraud;
Another one for sexual aggression;
The riot people witnessed you applaud –
'Go fight like hell!' A virtual confession.
A President? No, just a low-life scum –
Except to your supporters, just as dumb.
Brian Allgar

NO. 3463: NAME DROPPING

You are invited to submit an acrostic poem in the style of a well-known poet, the first letters of each line spelling out the poet's name or names (initials allowed). Please email entries (maximum 16 lines) to competition@spectator.co.uk by midday on 12 August.

Crossword 2763: Set in London

by Fire



Unclued lights, across single or double entries, one entry used twice, follow a theme which is also thus represented.

Across

1 Western Lake District rambling is not approved by the Union (7,6)
9 Rio's crime writer, Romeo, going round in circles (7)
11 A faith leader disregarding bishop about drink (7)
16 Uninitiated outsiders getting rights to property (5)
17 Australian officer accepting off and on fear of flying (4)
20 'A flipping cat eats uniform' by hot dramatist (7)
21 Self-absorbed people like Oscar getting firsts (7)
23 Playing 'Pairs' in the empty pad (7)
24 Mr Speaker's gutted to host regressive individual (5)
25 Close vacant factory storing footwear (5)
31 Without Victoria, sadly can't ever perform again (7)
37 Harangue artist in retrospective review (6)
38 Dance backwards, embracing grand old swindler (5)
39 Make up for almost never returning from home (4,3)
40 A close friend beginning to mock POTUS? (7)
41 Disparaging reference to models of dryers (13)

Down

2 Hybrid car engine giving Ferrari feel finally when reversing (5)
3 Go in neutral jacket featuring sequins at the front… (5)
4 … to premiere of *The End of Love* with Mississippi idols (6)
5 Governors and special forces taking part in uprising (7)
6 Spooner's choir is hoarse (7)
7 Start to work from home after strike (4,2)
8 Chairman wrongly accepted university place, many years ago (9)
10 They record fall of a US ageing Republican in turmoil (4,6)
13 Sprinkle stain extremely lightly with caustic spirit (7)
15 Fixed term contracts in EU end badly (8)
22 Playing table tennis isn't cleared or sustainable (7)
26 Start of 2027? Party time! (4,3)
28 Understanding amongst government enterprises (7)
29 Bird in gnarled tree by lake is under pressure (6)
30 Somewhat sought after clubhouses? (6)
32 Trouble when a horse starts to roll over (5)
33 Some animals have these hard or nodulous extremities (5)
34 Sends junk plans back; success in the end (5)

A first prize of a £30 John Lewis voucher and two runners-up prizes of £20 vouchers for the first correct solutions opened on 17 August. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to **crosswords@spectator.co.uk**, or post to: Crossword 2763, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.

Name .....

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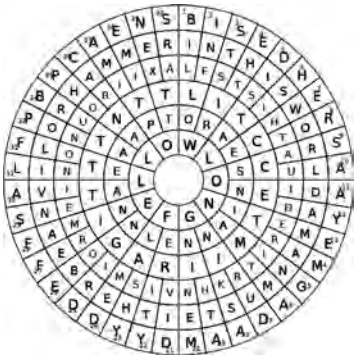


SOLUTION TO 2760: METALWORK

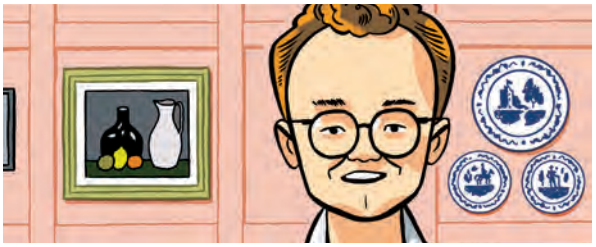
'IN THIS WORLD A MAN MUST EITHER BE ANVIL OR HAMMER' from HYPERION (extra letters from mixtures, marked [B]) by LONGFELLOW.

First prize Maddy Coelho, Winchelsea
Runners-up Charlotte Blundell, Richmond, Twickenham; Rob Hardcastle, Harrogate, N. Yorkshire

Food

Common perfection

Angus Colwell



The worst areas to eat in London are the best places to live. Hampstead, Chelsea, Chiswick, St John's Wood: all would be lucky to have even one restaurant that would be an 8/10 in Hackney. This is disappointing because Hackney is annoying, but, hey, hipsters make good restaurants.

I wonder why these areas are so lacking. Is it because St John's Wood Man has an underpaid cook on speed dial? Is it because Belgravian Influencer orders a shawarma every night? Is it because Hampstead Family go into town when they eat out?

Whatever the explanation, the exception to this rule is Wandsworth Common. Here, there are some absolute giants (my theory is that Wandsworth is more right-wing-coded, and right-wingers are happier to do the three-course-three-bottles thing). The best is Chez Bruce, which sits on the site of Harvey's, Marco Pierre White's old place. Chez Bruce is a monster of a restaurant: yep, we'll serve Pierre Koffmann's stuffed pig's trotter; yep, we'll wheel out a board of 21 cheeses. It's a vision of what was considered brilliant in the 1980s. It vindicates that era's cooking, and it doubles up as a kind of burgundy bunker to protect its diners from the assaults of modernity.

A little bruschetta of chopped rabbit livers comes next, visible through a translucent sheet of lardo

Rosina sits a few doors down, staring at that slightly austere common. It's the new opening by Adam Byatt, the chef most inspiring junior cooks. Look him up on YouTube, where he posts his cooking videos, and swoon. Before Byatt, Instagram reels were dominated by young men with moustaches and perma-wet hair, cooking the same kind of placeless thing: it's butter beans, it's pork on rice, it's pork on rice but with butter beans. One can imagine Byatt watching this, running his hands through his lovely silver hair, and going: 'Screw that, I'm making a coq au vin.' His most recent video is a charming tease: the idea that I, if I follow his steps, can make a Michelin-level duck à l'orange.

Of course, I can't, so that is why I am at Rosina. Byatt is best known for his Clapham restaurant Trinity, which has one star. It's French-leaning, proud of its sauces, but it's always looked a bit parsimonious. No such problems at Rosina, which sees Byatt trying Italian food. I don't get the impression this place is going for a star, thank goodness. It's been given a lot of thought, though. You can watch a beautifully filmed five-part YouTube series of him travelling through Italy finding the best olive oil and mortadella and rice, but I didn't.

A £2.50 cover charge gets you bread, breadsticks, olives, olive oil and Amalfi lemon. From there, we get a plate of mortadella (£7), enough to stuff a shoebox. Not the cheap luncheon meat stuff we all dread, but folds of something of a considerable porkiness. A little bruschetta of chopped rabbit livers comes next, visible through a translucent sheet of lardo, all underneath some fuzzy sage (£6).

A datterini tomato salad (£8) is also gorgeous. It comes with nectarine, mozzarella and basil, but the really lovely thing is the tomatoes have been peeled, thus softer, thus more vivid. An attention-seeking white risotto with an egg yolk (£20) is good, but more enjoyable to look at than eat (rice just too soft). Better was mezze maniche with a red veal, pork and beef ragù (£20), which, interestingly, seemed to have been baked in an oven. Roast turbot with wilted greens, capers and lemon (£38) was a wonderful main for a neighbourhood restaurant: meet my expectations; don't confound them. Tiramisu (£7) came from a tray, and with that, Rosina achieved perfection.

Rosina, 35 Bellevue Road, London SW17 7EF; tel: 020 8672 5888.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. A woman I have known for many years and who helped look after my mother has just had her leg amputated. One Saturday this month, she is out of hospital and is throwing a late birthday party at her farm with a hog roast etc to celebrate. However, I have invited a schoolfriend to stay that weekend, and she has pancreatic cancer. Would it be very rude to go to the party for a short time? I have a charming, polite, gay man as my other house guest to keep my schoolfriend company.
– E.S., Sussex

A. Never underestimate the fun of spending unsupervised time in someone else's house. Your guests would be delighted if you went out to a party. However, don't be tempted to raise the topic of rival health conditions and which one trumps which. There could be no useful outcome. Just say you have to go out for a short time to honour a social obligation.

Q. I have been invited to revisit a small Greek island, but have heard that a former boyfriend, who has drunk too much, is now something of a bore. What should I do if I run into him in the market in the main square?
– S.M., London SW1

A. Wear a face mask and a large sun hat to the market. If he does recognise you, tell him to keep his distance as you are suffering from a new Covid variant.

Q. My husband is in the art world and loves going to museums and galleries, but taking children is always a penance. They get bored so quickly and only cheer up when it's time to go to the gift shop. How do you make the experience more enjoyable?
– A.E., Pewsey, Wilts

A. Decide to study in detail no more than ten artworks, be they paintings, statues or ceramics. Don't tell the children in advance that you are going to do this, but when it's time to head to the gift shop, go straight to the postcard section and ask them to pick out any paintings or sculptures they remember from the gallery. This will undoubtedly bring out sibling competitiveness. The winner can be awarded with the obligatory pencil and rubber.

Q. Re. Vicks VapoRub (Dear Mary, 4 July): many years ago in Johannesburg, transporting a dozen or more thoroughbreds to a racecourse could be chaotic if fillies and pre-gelded males were placed in the same vehicle. It was quite usual for trainers to use VapoRub on the noses of the entires so they would not become restive from the smell of a filly among them.
– L.S., Chiang Mai, Thailand

A. Thank you for sharing this recollection.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

Tony Laithwaite loves wine. Of course he does. As the owner of wineries and vineyards around the world, and as the force behind Direct Wines, the *Sunday Times* Wine Club and Laithwaites Wine, he's bound to.

What I mean is he actually loves the wine in his glass, and that after almost 60 years in the trade (gaining a CBE for his trouble) he still smiles with unabashed delight as he uncorks a bottle of something tasty.

Having bumped into Tony at a recent dinner, I challenged him to join me at *The Spectator* with as many favourite bottles as he could muster in order to conjure up a selection worthy of you, dear reader.

He more than met the challenge. I then failed hopelessly in picking six from his long list and ended up choosing ten. Lucky you!

The 2025 Alta Tierra Sauvignon Blanc Gran Reserva (1) is from the Elqui Valley, Chile, near the Atacama Desert, a blessed spot to grow grapes, thanks to the high altitude, intense sun and Andes snowmelt. I loved its hints of elderflower, gooseberry and cut grass and its sheer intensity and concentration. £14 down from £16.

They don't grow much Roussanne or Marsanne in Chile, so Rhône-inspired 2024 LFE 360 Series Roussanne Marsanne (2) from the Colchagua Valley is a delightful rarity. I lapped up the wine's peachy, peary, honeyed creaminess. £16 down from £19.

The 2025 Seifried Gewürztraminer (3) from Nelson, NZ, is gorgeous. I found papaya in it and mango, then lychee and rose petals. Tony just smiled. It's fresh, lively and spicy and, despite all the exotic fruit, finishes dry to off-dry. £16 down from £20.

2025 Hunter's Marlborough Riesling (4), from one of NZ's most celebrated estates, is as sophisticated a Riesling as you'll find, crisp, pure, focused and completely bone dry. A hearty second glass confirmed my findings. £14 down from £17.

The 2024 Loubissou Organic Rosé (5) is the palest of pink rosés from a tiny cooperative in the Languedoc rather than, as I expected, Provence. A blend of Grenache, Syrah and Cinsault lifted by a touch of (white) Clairette, it's an ideal 11 a.m. summer sharpener. £17 down from £20.

The 2024 Winzer Krems Classic Blauer Zweigelt (6) is a perfect example of Austria's most-planted red grape. From the banks of the Danube, it's fresh, juicy and easy-going, full of raspberry/strawberry fruit and a touch of spice. £13 down from £15.

The 2021 Altos R. Crianza Rioja (7) from half French/half Spanish winemaker Jean-Marc Sauboua, is classic Rioja, all mellow, mature dark cherry fruit with sweetness and savouriness combined. £17 down from £19.

The 2023 Grand Vin de l'Epervier (8) might only be a vin de table, thanks to its component Grenache, Syrah and Carignan being drawn from across Languedoc's various AOCs, but its quality is far higher. It's a beauty, with silky smooth fruit, richness and spice. This is its last ever vintage so snap it up while you can. £17 down from £20.

The 2022 Château La Clarière (9), from Castillon, is where it all began for Mr L. He worked here as a teenager and now owns the estate, producing extremely genial Merlot-based, Saint Emilion-worthy reds of style, structure and elegance. £23 down from £30.

Finally, the Windsor Great Park English Sparkling Brut (10), a traditional method fizz from a vineyard planted by Tony at the suggestion of the park's then ranger, Prince Philip. A typical blend of Pinot Noir, Meunier and Chardonnay, it's lightly honeyed yet dry, with hints of crisp apple and a stream of fine bubbles. £34 down from £44.

Mixed Case A (11) contains one bottle each of wines 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8 and Mixed Case B (12) contains two each. The Kiwi Case (13) contains three bottles each of wines 3 and 4. Wine 10 is offered in boxes of three. Delivery, as ever, is free.

Tony Laithwaite and Jonathan Ray would love you to join them for an informal wine tasting and discussion in the Spectator *garden on Monday 7 September. For more details, go to www.spectator.com/tastings*

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Prices in form are per case of six unless otherwise stated			*List*	*Club*
White	1	2025 Alta Tierra Sauvignon Blanc Gran Reserva, 12.5%	~~£96.00~~	£84.00
	2	2024 LFE 360 Series Roussanne Marsanne, 13.4%	~~£114.00~~	£96.00
	3	2025 Seifried Gewürztraminer, 11.5%	~~£120.00~~	£96.00
	4	2025 Hunter's Marlborough Riesling, 11.5%	~~£102.00~~	£84.00
Rosé	5	2024 Loubissou Organic Rosé, 12%	~~£120.00~~	£102.00
Red	6	2024 Winzer Krems Classic Blauer Zweigelt, 12.5%	~~£90.00~~	£78.00
	7	2021 Altos R. Crianza Rioja, 14.5%	~~£114.00~~	£102.00
	8	2023 Grand Vin de l'Epervier, 14.5%	~~£120.00~~	£102.00
	9	2022 Château La Clarière, 14.5%	~~£180.00~~	£138.00
Sparkling	10	Windsor Great Park English Sparkling Brut, 12% (3 bottles)	~~£132.00~~	£102.00
Mixed	11	Mixed case A (six bottles, 1 each of wines 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 & 8)	~~£109.00~~	£83.94
	12	Mixed case B (12 bottles, 2 each of wines 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 & 8)	~~£218.00~~	£167.88
	13	Kiwi case (three bottles each of wines 3 & 4)	~~£111.00~~	£89.88

Prices include VAT and delivery on the British mainland. This offer, which is subject to availability, closes on 12 September. Payment should be made either by phone or direct from the website (see details above or scan the QR code to the right). View the full list at www.laithwaites.co.uk/wine/spectator

No sacred cows

Will no one think of the vines?

Toby Young

There was something surreal about my visit to La Cité du Vin, Bordeaux's wine museum, last Saturday. From the top floor, with its panoramic view of the city, you could see the smoke from the Gironde wildfire turning the sky yellow, yet none of the staff seemed remotely concerned. This was in spite of the fact that the conflagration had already triggered France's largest evacuation since the second world war and was getting closer to Bordeaux every hour. OK, maybe they thought it unlikely they'd be asked to leave their homes, but weren't they worried about the region's vineyards? These people worked at a museum dedicated to celebrating wine, for Christ's sake.

The day before, I'd made a pilgrimage to Château Rauzan-Ségla as part of a trip to Bordeaux which Caroline had organised to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. It was 35°C when we were taken into the vineyard – the first stop on the tour – and at that point our guide seemed more concerned about the ongoing drought than the nearby fire. The lack of rainfall means the berries are still quite immature, but that could turn out to be a blessing as unripened grapes are less likely to suffer from 'smoke taint', whereby an entire vintage can be contaminated. Even if the fires don't reach the vineyards, the smoke probably will. By the time I left Bordeaux on Saturday afternoon, the entire city smelt like a bonfire.

Some of the finest reds in the world are located on the Gironde's left bank, the same side as the fire

I know I risk sounding like an unfeeling plutocrat, given that several firefighters have already lost their lives, but I cannot help thinking about the 61 crus classés of 1855. These are among the finest reds in the world and all are located on the Gironde's left bank, the same side as the fire. If they go up in smoke, it would be a civilisational blow equivalent to the Louvre burning down. I'm amazed there's been so little attention devoted to this in the coverage the fire's received. Yes, the threat to the local wildlife probably makes for a better story, but even so. We're talking about Lafite Rothschild, Latour and Margaux.

I was keen to go to Rauzan-Ségla because its second wine is one of my favourites, particularly the 2015. The winemaker did better than many of its competitors that year because the recently appointed director, Nicolas Audebert, took the bold decision to bring the harvest forward by three weeks. I fantasised about meeting Audebert in the underground vault where the magic happens and comparing tasting notes.

Getting in wasn't easy. Rauzan-Ségla is owned by the same family who own Chanel, and when Caroline called the château to book a tour she was quizzed about my taste in wine. She had to send photos from my collection, but because the whole trip was supposed to be a surprise she couldn't ask my advice about which bottles to photograph and chose some pretty ropey ones. '*C'est pas possible*,' came the haughty reply. She ended up having to book the trip through a tour operator called Smooth Red, which was better at sweet-talking the gatekeepers than her.

Naturally, the difficulty of getting past the velvet rope made the experience that bit more special, although seeing up close how a famous wine is produced was always going to be fascinating. Some of it I knew, but much of it I didn't, such as the fact that the juice is initially left to mature in wooden barrels produced by master craftsmen, with each cooper's brand introducing different notes. I had naively thought that the different elements that need to be combined to create a great vintage were just varieties of grapes, with the wines of the left bank dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon. But in fact there are dozens of different variables, including the barrels, and there's no formula to fall back on, because of how the ingredients taste changes from year to year. It's an art that owes as much to the institutional memory of a great château as it does to chemical analysis.

The climax of the tour was a trip to the tasting room, from which you could see the vines that had produced the wine in your glass. We sampled the 2019, 2017 and 2015 – all good vintages, although the first two are a little young. The 2015, by contrast, was exquisite, and our guide kindly gave us the bottle to take home. As we sat in our hotel later, drinking the wine, ashes began to appear outside the window and a smell of burning trees filled the room. Caroline found an Instagram video of horses galloping down a main road in Cap Ferret to escape the fire, and started worrying about them and all the pets people have been forced to leave behind. But my mind was still fixed on the 61 crus classés. Please God, let them be spared.

MICHAEL HEATH

The Wiki Man

Sweat the small stuff, Mr Burnham

Rory Sutherland

I am cautiously optimistic about our new leader. For one thing, the fact that Mr Burnham went to Cambridge not Oxford, did not study PPE, is not a lawyer and did not grow up in Surrey makes him something of a diversity hire among our more recent UK prime ministers.

This gives us hope. It is a near-universal law of problem-solving that you cannot think your way out of problems using the same mindset that created them in the first place.

One tip. Government needs a marketing function. Rather than explaining itself to the public, it has endlessly sought to cadge publicity by ingratiating itself with the news media. As all journalists since Watergate are largely motivated by discrediting those in power, this is hopeless. Burnham should learn from the Trump playbook and start insulting journalists. Then bypass the press altogether using social media or even paid advertising. (The government spends less on advertising than Specsavers and B&Q combined.)

Imagine if you wanted to launch the new V10, 8.3 litre Dodge Viper and the only spokesman you could use was Greta Thunberg. This is pretty much the position in which modern politicians find themselves: trying to communicate via the mouthpiece of someone who dislikes you. Remember, modern journalists are no longer contented, well-watered members of the Establishment but bitter, over-educated people who made a really bad career choice in the early 2000s.

Occasional catastrophes cause much less annoyance than frequent peeves

Consequently, chasing press coverage is ultimately futile. If you were somehow forced to use Thunberg to launch the new Dodge Viper, the only workable strategy would be to use reverse psychology and to emphasise how much Greta hated the car. Since a lot of people hate Greta Thunberg, this would work very well. The reason that the Trump strategy works very well is because a lot of people hate journalists.

A second marketing tip. Sweat the small stuff. I once had a friendly contretemps with the political editor of the *Financial Times* over John Major's cones hotline. He argued that this project was beneath the dignity of a prime minister. I argued that it was precisely this kind of thing (stupid roadworks) that riles people most about government. It is well understood by carmakers that constant minor niggles and squeaks are much more damaging to customer satisfaction than, say, a complete transmission failure after 15,000 miles. Occasional catastrophes cause much less annoyance than frequent peeves. And government has, for some bizarre reason, become a major source of constant minor acts of effrontery against the public. Seen alone, these are small, but they compound. Government today often feels less like a policeman and more like a traffic warden, someone trying to catch you out. I was a month late paying some taxes. Five years ago, I would have sorted it out with a phone call. Now they summarily fined me £2,000 and the onus is on me to sort it out. There are too many peremptory behaviours of this kind.

Hence, any prime minister could be re-elected simply by making life less irritating. Small details matter. I wouldn't go as far as Count Binface, whose Makerfield manifesto included a pledge to move the hand dryer in the gents' toilets in the Crown and Treaty pub in Uxbridge to a more sensible position, but he was on the right lines. Two sensible people have created a website, Quibble.org.uk, as a repository for such ideas. For instance, it's time to sort out Britain's execrable mobile coverage, which is in large part caused by outdated planning laws. It's time to get rid of speed camera signs where there are no speed cameras. And to ditch the legislation behind those stupid cookie pop-ups.

One personal favour for the over-sixties: on scroll-down menus where you give your date of birth, can we legislate so that the birth-year defaults to, say, 1975 rather than 2010? Scrolling back to 1965 feels like a memento mori. You might as well put a Holbein skull on the page.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Beyond Manchester

'Things are just completely coming full circle here. For me to be here with you all in the heart of Manchester this Friday morning, at the end of a fairly big week, is just everything to me,' said a Mr A.M. Burnham MA (Cantab.) after he had sent all his advisers up the hill to Manchester only to send them back down again. Seneca would have had something to say about that.

Addressing his friend Lucilius, Seneca points out that it is no surprise that his travels have done nothing for his state of mind and goes on to quote Socrates: 'Why do you wonder that globe-trotting does not help you, seeing that you always take yourself with you? You cannot shake off the reason that sent you on your travels.' So what was that reason? Mr Burnham knows about Manchester already. Did he achieve anything there which he would not have been able to do just as well in London?

The point is that Mr Burnham intends to devolve his power to local communities across the country of which he has no experience whatsoever and about which he knows nothing. That is the situation in which Roman emperors found themselves.

True, they had sent their own choice of governors into every one of the Roman provinces, whose job it was to work with the locals in Rome's best interests. Nevertheless, there was nothing like finding out for themselves.

Take the Emperor Hadrian. From AD 121-126 and 128-134 he traversed the whole empire. In this way he could consolidate the reality of imperial rule, secure the allegiance of the local elites, deal with grievances and legal disputes, satisfy himself of military arrangements and the protection of borders, and encourage the maintenance of the imperial cult, while demonstrating imperial benevolence by funding public works e.g. temples, aqueducts, theatres and granting Roman citizenship to deserving individuals.

If Mr Burnham really intends to raise living standards in every postcode, then instead of going back home every week he might consider instead doing a Hadrian every week and showing real interest in all areas of the UK.

— *Peter Jones*

Seen elsewhere

We want Andy's dad-core vibe

Clair Holden

As seen in the New World

When that More In Common poll dropped this week showing Andy Burnham comfortably ahead of Reform, SW1 was flabbergasted. But as an avid follower of social media trends, a millennial journalist who began digital first, I was only surprised that the bounce hadn't been bigger.

All weekend my WhatsApp groups have been buzzing with the latest Andy Burnham online viral memes. In 'Babe.net class of 14', a video from X was shared of Pat McFadden, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, having a Brat summer. In another called 'Soho Reading Society' someone posted a clip of Sue Gray doing the Cinnamon Challenge and Douglas Alexander hitting a perfect whip and nae nae on College Green.

And this is just the start. I can already see what comes next. The man from the Chocolate Rain viral video dancing the Harlem Shake with the entire PLP. John Healey and Yvette Cooper re-enacting 'Charlie bit my finger'. At the start of PMQs Burnham could refuse to respond to questions and just perform the Cup Song to throw Kemi Badenoch off. The vibe's the limit. And look, this isn't necessarily my application for a job with the social team in No. 10, but email clairh@ucl.co.uk for my full CV.

Thanks to thousands of hours spent doomscrolling on their phones, your average Brit doesn't want policy

You may sniff at all this. But we're living in a post-literate world. We're a dying breed, we lovers of the printed word. It's a neglected subject, but you may have noticed that people are reading fewer books than they used to. There was a time when all sections of society gorged themselves on the classics. In the late 19th century, a Liverpool docker would leave the house every day with a Thermos of tea, a cheese and pickle sandwich and a hardback copy of Sally Rooney's latest novel. Unfortunately, those days are long behind us. Being able to read at all is increasingly a privilege reserved for people like you and me.

Andy Burnham is our first English graduate PM and a lover of poetry but he knows which way the wind is blowing. Thanks to thousands of hours spent doomscrolling on their phones, your average Brit doesn't want policy, but positive vibes. This is especially true when it comes to Generation Z, who have spent their first two decades being banged about from the Great Recession to Brexit and then straight into the pandemic.

It should come as no surprise to us then that the creators at the vanguard of Burnham's digital positivity drive are mostly young. They've had enough of our hard-bitten millennial cynicism and are now determined to turn cope into hope. When I think about my first dabbling in viral content, I remember my two-week digital internship at *Vice* some time in the early 2010s. This was at the height of the Great Recession, so as recent graduates we were begging to work for free. I think the content back then reflected our anger: gangbangers in Seoul; cannibal warlords in Sierra Leone; the epic queue outside Berghain (need I say where? OK, fine, I will: Berlin).

(I have a reminder on my phone not to start writing about the cultural legacy of *Vice* again, lest there be a repeat of the disaster of spring 2024, when I had to leave Stoke Newington, move back into my parents' home in Watford and witness my income from freelancing dry up completely, so we shall leave it there.)

Back to Andy. When Gen Z sees the new PM with his salt-and-pepper hair, his thick-frame glasses, his paunch pressed against his black T-shirt, they don't get wound up like the middle-aged broadsheet columnists. Instead they Snapchat each other about how Andy is giving 'dad-core energy'. It's giving security. It's giving safety. It's giving comfort. It's giving reassurance in an era of anxiety. It's giving two terms in government.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Wood's words

When the King visited Oxford in September 1687, there was a bit of a shambles in the Bodleian, where they had laid out a banquet for his breakfast. He ate some mutton and pheasant, but, not inviting others to eat, he alone ate. When he had finished, there was a scramble for the many dishes left over. The University had paid £160 for this banquet or *ambigue*, noted the antiquarian Anthony Wood (1632-95).

Ambigue, borrowed from French *ambigu*, meant a meal where all the dishes were served at once. It appears in the fifth index, 'Words', printed in 1900 in a 400-page volume of indexes to Anthony Wood's *Life and Times* edited by the indefatigable Andrew Clark, who claimed 'a little space for words and spellings characteristic of Wood', and for 'a few minor subjects' not in the other indexes.

Balcony: the first in England was made in about 1620 by Marc Antony de Dominis, the renegade Archbishop of Split, 'on the backside of the Savoy' of which he was appointed Master. Stressed on second syllable until about 1825, says the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Calash: a light carriage, as used by the Prince of Orange for his entry into St James's on 18 December 1688. It comes from Polish *kołaska*.

Fantasticks: fanciful compositions which, with rebuses and devices, were cut on the Warden of Merton's dining-room windows, which Richard Lydall took down as soon as he came into office in 1693. In 1626, a sort of rural calendar was published called *Fantastickes*.

Noctivagation: wandering outside college by night. The Vice-Chancellor fined two graduate members of St John's £2 each for being in the Crown after 10 p.m. *Noctivagation* is found in English only from the 17th century, probably because in universities (or monasteries) before then the concept was expressed in Latin.

Shark: 'Wright Croke of Merston, eldest son to Sir Richard Croke, was posted up for a shark and coward in Day's coffey house.' A shark was a scrounger and sponger. The posting up was on paper or with chalk. The same word, *posting*, now thrives online.

— Dot Wordsworth

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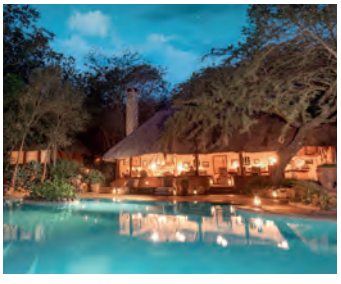
This is a trip for readers who love to explore Africa's incredible wilderness landscapes, encountering Samburu pastoralist culture and abundant wildlife off the beaten track. The tour will offer both an authentic bush experience, along with fantastic food and wine and stories of old Africa around the campfire.

Starting in Nairobi and travelling via private charter planes, we will spend two nights at Reteti House in Sarara Conservancy, moving on to Enasoit private conservancy in Laikipia, just north-west of Mount Kenya, for three nights.



For the full itinerary and costings visit **spectator.com/safari** or email Nikki at **info@bigwildsafaris.com**

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